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CIA Memo Discounts 'Oppressive Analyst, Who Visited in Mid-1992, Gave Members of Congress

By Christopher Marquis
Knight-Ridder

At a time when human rights monitors charged the Haitian military was terrorizing its people last year, a senior CIA analyst visited the country and reported "there is no systematic or frequent" murder of civilians.

In a classified CIA memo, the analyst said he saw "no evidence of oppressive rule" in Haiti 10 months after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a bloody coup on Sept. 30, 1991.

Brian Latell, the national intelligence officer for Latin America, effusively praised military-backed Prime Minister Marc Bazin and military chief Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras in the memo dated July 21, 1992.

"I do not wish to minimize the role the military plays in intimidating, and occasionally terrorizing real and suspected opponents," Latell wrote, "but my experiences confirm the [intelligence] community's view that there is no systematic or frequent lethal violence aimed at civilians."

The memo was circulated among Bush and Clinton administration policymakers. It clashes starkly with accounts of conditions in Haiti by leading human rights groups and with the State Department's assessment of military repression at the time.

"Obviously, we have visited two different countries," said Carlos Salinas, Amnesty International's program officer for Latin America and the Caribbean, who estimates that more than 2,000 civilians have been killed by Haitian authorities since the 1991 coup. "That anyone could go to Haiti at that time and not observe repression by the military is absurd."

The memo, obtained by the Miami Herald, also provides an unfiltered glimpse of the work of Latell, a 30-year career officer, who caught headlines in October by presenting a highly critical, classified portrait of Aristide to Congress, just as the Clinton administration was considering whether to use military force to restore him.

In that portrait Latell asserted that Aristide

had been treated for mental illness at a Montreal hospital in the early 1980s. There has been no evidence to support that assertion. Several lawmakers later voiced concerns about the quality and objectivity of the CIA reporting on Haiti, and President Clinton said he simply did not believe

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—Brian Latell, CIA national intelligence officer

the agency's conclusions about Aristide, who was elected president three years ago.

CIA spokesman Kent Harrington declined to comment and said Latell was bound by CIA rules not to discuss matters of intelligence.

As the national intelligence officer for Latin America, Latell maintains a high-profile, public position as a senior analyst and liaison to other U.S. intelligence organizations, particularly the Pentagon and the National Security Agency. He is the CIA's conduit to the policymaking community, has the final say on intelligence estimates for Latin America and works directly for CIA Director R. James Woolsey.

Latell's memo, "Impressions of Haiti," was based on a five-day trip he took in July 1992 to the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Haitian National Assembly had installed Bazin as prime minister a few weeks earlier, with a nod from the military.

After meeting with several Haitian officials, Latell said he was impressed with the govern-

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ment, making no mention of Bazin's support for the coup that toppled Aristide.

"These meetings reinforced my view that Bazin and his supporters are perhaps the most promising group of Haitian leaders to emerge since the Duvalier family dictatorship was deposed in 1986," he wrote.

Cedras, the military leader who has presided over a period of deepening repression and humanitarian crisis, won similar approval.

"Gen. Cedras impressed me as a conscientious military leader who genuinely wishes to minimize his role in politics, professionalize the armed services, and develop a separate and competent civilian police force," Latell wrote. "I believe he is relatively moderate and uncorrupt. . . . He compares especially favorably to nearly all past and most present senior military commanders."

Latell said he "saw no evidence of oppressive rule" in Haiti and rarely observed more than two soldiers together on the streets. "This was in sharp contrast to the Dominican Republic where in the capital and countryside I saw numerous uniformed personnel," he wrote.

Latell's portraits of Cedras and Bazin were widely echoed in the Defense and State departments at the time, while U.S. officials voiced concerns about Aristide's character and his leftist beliefs.

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch in New York, criticized what he said was a two-pronged effort by U.S. hard-liners to discredit Aristide while bolstering perceived "moderates" in the de facto government.

"Everyone's a moderate when the U.S. government is trying to promote them over a leftist alternative," Roth said.

The State Department's Bureau of Human Rights reported that politically motivated violence declined in 1992 from the violent aftermath of the coup, but said violent abuses remained "frequent" and that post-coup governments did nothing "to restrain abuses by elements of the armed forces or to prevent the military from stifling any pro-Aristide sentiment."