

Haiti

In Haiti, filthy riches

Looters find moldy money in a safe at exiled Haitian leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide's home.

By DAVID ADAMS, Times Latin America Correspondent
Published March 4, 2004



[Times photos: John Pendygraft]

Looters found a double safe in a secret concrete walled chamber under the salon of Jean-Bertrand Aristide's home. These were empty, but another safe in the same chamber contained an estimated \$350,000 in rotting U.S. currency.



Some of the U.S. bank notes looters found in the Haitian president's home were so rotten they crumbled almost to dust.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - When Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide went into exile Sunday, he left something behind - a secret stash of rotting \$100 bills, estimated at \$350,000.

The money, wrapped in disintegrating elastic bands, was discovered in a safe sealed behind a concrete block wall in a secret underground compartment under the main salon of Aristide's private residence.

To whom the money belongs, and what it was doing there no one knows.

Aristide was escorted from the mansion on the western outskirts of the city before dawn Sunday by U.S. diplomatic security agents, bound for the airport and a flight to the Central African Republic.

Hours later a mob of looters - mostly neighbors in the surrounding shantytowns - broke through the gates of the estate and headed up the curving driveway lined by fir trees.

Within a couple of hours, the house was stripped of every piece of furniture. When reporters visited the deserted two-story home Wednesday, a baby grand piano sat abandoned in the driveway tilting on two legs. The keys still worked. One curious Haitian tinkled a few bars of The Sting.

Inside, several works of art, including an oil portrait of Aristide and a photo of the late Robert Kennedy, leaned awkwardly against a wall. In an upstairs office there were hundreds of books, mostly written by Aristide, including boxes of his autobiography.

An empty Dom Perignon box sat in a room off the wrecked kitchen, next to a bottle of vanity wine labeled "Cuvée Aristide." As a sign of his prestige, there were also a number of plaques and the keys to the city of Hollywood, Calif., engraved with a welcome from the "entertainment capital of the world." More appropriate to his current exile was a 10-page treatise on "Traditional Life in Africa."

Haitian security men guarding the property from further vandalism said that after most of the looters left, a hard-core group stayed on intent on searching the 20-room home for hidden treasure.

It took them 36 hours, but what they came across astounded them. At the bottom of a stairwell, leading to a spacious basement, they discovered a sealed chamber containing four safes. They found it after tapping on the walls of the basement in pitch darkness. When they broke down the wall, they dragged the safes outside and smashed them open with sledgehammers. One contained documents and newspapers. Two were empty. But the fourth provided a surprise.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," said one of the looters who agreed to be interviewed on condition that he not be named.

After leading reporters down narrow alleyways to a simple breeze-block home in a dirty yard shaded by mango trees, he invited them into his dining room. Telling curious relatives and neighbors to make themselves scarce, he disappeared into a bedroom and returned with a plastic bag.

Inside, was a pile of dirty hundred dollar bills. The bills were so rotten that some had crumbled almost into dust. Others were so tightly compressed they were impossible to separate. The man described how the looters found five equal-sized stacks of the bills, each measuring about 3 inches thick. He estimated that his portion amounted to between \$20,000 and \$30,000. But a Haitian banker who was asked to calculate the approximate value of a 15-inch pile of the bills estimated the bounty could amount to as much as \$350,000.

The looter, a 29-year-old who described himself as a long-time supporter of Aristide's Lavalas Family party, was angry.

"It's barbarism. All the poor people suffered for him and he had all this money hidden under his house," the looter said.

A Miami lawyer who represents Aristide, Ira Kurzban, warned against jumping to conclusions. "I don't know whose money it is. I don't know what to say," he said.

Rumors have swirled for some time that Aristide, a penniless former priest who rose to become the country's most powerful politician, has amassed a sizeable fortune during a 14-

year political career. Opponents have accused his wife, a U.S.-educated lawyer, of setting up front companies to hide her husband's investments.

For the man holding the looted money, a veritable fortune in a country where the majority of the population earns barely \$1 a day, it was the last straw.

"It's so bizarre, it makes me sick," he said.