

Haiti's Leader Kept a List of Drug Traffickers. His Assassins Came for It.

In the months before his murder, President Jovenel Moïse took a number of steps to fight drug and arms smugglers. Some officials now fear he was killed for it.

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Published in the NYT's, Dec. 12, 2021

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/world/americas/jovenel-moise-haiti-president-drug-traffickers.html>

PORT-AU-PRINCE — President Jovenel Moïse of Haiti was about to name names.

Before being assassinated in July, he had been working on a list of powerful politicians and businesspeople involved in Haiti's drug trade, with the intention of handing over the dossier to the American government, according to four senior Haitian advisers and officials tasked with drafting the document.

The president had ordered the officials to spare no one, not even the power brokers who had helped propel him into office, they said — one of several moves against suspected drug traffickers that could explain a motive for the assassination.

When gunmen burst into Mr. Moïse's residence and killed him in his bedroom, his wife, Martine Moïse — who had also been shot and lay bleeding on the floor, pretending to be dead — described how they stayed to search the room, hurriedly digging through his files.

"That's it," they finally declared to one another before fleeing, she told The New York Times in her first interview after the assassination, adding that she did not know what the gunmen had taken.

Investigators arrived at the crime scene to find Mr. Moïse's home office ransacked, papers strewn everywhere. In interrogations, some of the captured hit men confessed that retrieving the list Mr. Moïse had been working on — with the names of suspected drug traffickers — was a top priority, according to three senior Haitian officials with knowledge of the investigation.

The document was part of a broader series of clashes Mr. Moïse had with powerful political and business figures, some suspected of narcotics and arms trafficking. Mr. Moïse had known several of them for years, and they felt betrayed by his turn against them, his aides say.

In the months before his death, Mr. Moïse took steps to clean up Haiti's customs department, nationalize a seaport with a history of smuggling, destroy an airstrip used by drug traffickers and investigate the lucrative eel trade, which has recently been identified as a conduit for money laundering.

The Times interviewed more than 70 people and traveled to eight of Haiti's 10 departments, or states, to interview politicians, Mr. Moïse's childhood friends, police officers, fishermen and participants in the drug trade to understand what happened in the last seven months of the president's life that may have contributed to his death. Many of them now fear for their lives as well.

"I would be a fool to think that narco-trafficking and arms trafficking didn't play a role in the assassination," said Daniel Foote, who served as the U.S. special envoy to Haiti before stepping down last month. "Anyone who understands Haiti's politics or economics understands this."

A central figure on Mr. Moïse's list was Charles Saint-Rémy, known as Kiko, two of the Haitian officials tasked with helping draft the dossier said. Mr. Saint-Rémy, a Haitian businessman, has long been suspected by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of involvement in the drug trade. Notably, he is also the brother-in-law of former President Michel Martelly,

who lifted Mr. Moïse out of political obscurity and tapped him to be his successor.

Mr. Martelly, who is considering another run for the presidency, and Mr. Saint-Rémy were hugely influential in Mr. Moïse's government, with a say in everything from who got public contracts to which cabinet ministers got appointed, according to Haitian officials inside and outside his administration. But Mr. Moïse came to feel that they and other oligarchs were stifling his presidency, his aides say.

American officials say that they are looking closely at Mr. Moïse's efforts to disrupt the drug trade and challenge powerful families as motives in the assassination, and they note that Mr. Saint-Rémy emerged as a possible suspect early in the investigation. But they caution that Mr. Moïse threatened many of the economic elite, including a number of people with deep criminal connections.

Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy did not respond to a detailed list of questions for this article.

The investigation into Mr. Moïse's killing has stalled, American officials say, and if the assassination is not solved, many Haitians fear it will add to the mountain of impunity in the country, further emboldening the criminal networks that have captured the state.

Suspected drug and arms traffickers have long sat in Haiti's Parliament. Small planes with contraband frequently land on clandestine airstrips. Haitian police officers have been caught aiding drug smugglers, while judges are regularly bribed to throw cases.

Haiti may now provide the largest route for drugs destined for the United States, but no one knows for sure because the country has become so difficult to police. American law enforcement is unable to run a wiretapping program in the country, or even fully collaborate with its Haitian counterparts, because corruption in the police and judiciary runs so deep, U.S. officials say.

"Anyone involved in drug trafficking here has at least one police officer on their team," said Compère Daniel, the police commissioner of the Northwest Department of Haiti, a major transit smuggling corridor.

"It is impossible to get police officers to cooperate with me on the field," he said. "Sometimes they don't even answer my calls."

The D.E.A.'s operations in Haiti have also drawn scrutiny. Criticism of the agency has sharpened because at least two of the Haitians suspected of involvement in Mr. Moïse's assassination were former D.E.A. informants.

In November, the Senate Judiciary Committee criticized the D.E.A. for corruption allegations that have swirled around its Haiti operations, citing a Times investigation in August linking Mr. Moïse's head of palace security to the drug trade. The D.E.A., accused by former agents of mishandling one of Haiti's biggest drug cases, declined to comment.

'The True Leader Wasn't the President'

When Mr. Moïse was chosen by Mr. Martelly in 2014 to be his successor, Mr. Martelly introduced the nation to a supposed outsider with peasant origins, a man of the countryside who had lifted himself out of poverty by running banana plantations.

Mr. Martelly's associates said he first met Mr. Moïse during a conference and was struck by the entrepreneur's business acumen.

But the story was misleading: Mr. Moïse had mostly grown up in the capital, several of the original board members of his banana plantation say it was a failure, and Mr. Moïse was already a close associate of Mr. Saint-Rémy and at least one other suspected drug trafficker.

Mr. Moïse, 53 at the time of his assassination, was born in Trou-du-Nord, French for “hole of the North,” an agricultural town that has suffered under decades of government neglect. His father drove a tractor at a nearby sisal plantation but lost his job when it closed, according to interviews with local residents.

When Mr. Moïse was 7, his mother moved him and his siblings to Carrefour, a slum of Port-au-Prince, in search of work and a secondary school for her children, relatives said. In university, Mr. Moïse met his wife and they moved together to her hometown, Port-de-Paix, in the northwest.

By 2000, Mr. Moïse had met and become business partners with Evinx Daniel, according to relatives and acquaintances of both men. Mr. Daniel, a close friend of Mr. Martelly’s, would later be accused of drug trafficking.

Mr. Moïse worked with Mr. Daniel on one of his ventures, Mariella Food Products, which produced biscuits with a pigtailed schoolgirl on the packaging. A former high-ranking Haitian police officer said the company was suspected of being a money laundering front.

The full extent of Mr. Moïse’s involvement in the company is unclear, but a former senator, Jean Baptiste Bien-Aimé, recalled the men coming to his office to talk about the company about a decade ago, and said the men were often with Mr. Saint-Rémy, the brother-in-law of Mr. Martelly.

“They were always together. They were fish crushed in the soup,” said Mr. Bien-Aimé, using a local saying to describe close relationships.

Mr. Saint-Rémy has publicly admitted that he sold drugs in the past but claims all his businesses are now legitimate. Haitian law enforcement officials and former D.E.A. officers who recently served in Haiti say he is still believed to be one of the country’s biggest drug traffickers.

Jacques Jean Kinan, Mr. Moïse’s cousin, said he and Mr. Moïse worked with Mr. Saint-Rémy in the eel industry.

With his brother-in-law as president, Mr. Saint-Rémy wielded enormous influence, often demanding that choice licenses and contracts be awarded to him, particularly eel export licenses, according to officials in Mr. Martelly’s government.

When his demands were not heeded, he could turn violent: In 2015, Mr. Saint-Rémy assaulted an agriculture minister for issuing a contract without his consent, an altercation reported at the time and confirmed by a former government minister.

As Mr. Saint-Rémy’s hold on the eel trade solidified, Mr. Moïse decided to get out of the sector and focus on Agritrans, a banana plantation near his hometown.

“My father said that the Martelly family cornered the eel business and made it difficult to get in,” said Joverlein Moïse, the slain president’s son.

Mr. Moïse also kept in touch with his associate, Mr. Daniel, who had opened a hotel in Les Cayes, a coastal city in the south, an official and a relative said.

In 2013, Mr. Daniel told the authorities that he found 23 packages of marijuana floating at sea while he was on his boat and decided to bring them home. Mr. Daniel said at the time that he and Mr. Saint-Rémy called the D.E.A. to pick up the load he discovered.

A prosecutor, Jean Marie Salomon, doubted the story, suspecting it was a ploy to cover up a drug deal gone bad after locals had stumbled on the stash. He arrested Mr. Daniel on drug-trafficking charges, but he said Mr. Martelly’s minister of justice personally intervened and ordered his release.

Shortly after, Mr. Martelly went to Mr. Daniel’s hotel with a delegation in a clear display of support, Mr. Salomon said. “The message was, justice does not matter,” he said.

Just months after his release, Mr. Daniel went missing in 2014, his abandoned car found at a gas station. Two people — a relative of Mr. Daniel's and a police officer at the time — said Mr. Moïse was one of the last people to see him alive. Mr. Daniel is presumed dead.

Mr. Salomon suspects that drug traffickers killed him, concerned that he would expose their network as part of a plea deal, and Mr. Daniel's disappearance remains unsolved. Two investigators said they were sidelined by a federal police unit controlled by Mr. Martelly's government that took over the investigation and tampered with the evidence.

Barred by the Constitution from running for two consecutive terms, Mr. Martelly began looking for a successor. He wanted to find someone to keep the bench warm for him until he could launch another presidential bid and shield himself from corruption allegations involving the misappropriation of billions of dollars during his tenure, according to former officials in the Martelly and Moïse administrations.

He settled on Mr. Moïse, marketing him as a successful entrepreneur and nicknaming him the "Banana Man" on the campaign trail.

"I told Martelly, you have to look for the peasant vote, someone who looks like them, someone with black skin," said a former senator, Jacques Sauveur Jean, a friend and sometimes political ally of Mr. Martelly. He said Haitians were tired of the privileged light-skinned elite who ran the country, like Mr. Martelly, and felt that Mr. Moïse, with his dark skin and rural origins, better represented them.

In interviews, three of the original board members of Mr. Moïse's plantation business, Agritrans, described the venture as a failure, with their original investments lost and little but a barren field to show for it.

But as Mr. Martelly contemplated a successor, the company received a \$6 million loan from the government.

Esther Antoine, one of Mr. Moïse's campaign managers, said she worked to polish his image, to get rid of a stutter that had haunted him and improve his confidence onstage. But on the campaign trail Mr. Martelly took center stage, she said, outshining the man he was supposed to be promoting.

Ms. Antoine, who worried that Mr. Martelly's outsize presence was "drowning" her candidate, said she convinced the president to give Mr. Moïse the space to campaign alone. That did not sit well with Mr. Martelly's wife, Sophia, she said.

She said the first lady grew suspicious of Ms. Antoine and called her to the Martelly family home in the middle of the night, reprimanding her for not informing them of Mr. Moïse's every move.

Ms. Antoine said she pushed back, arguing that she was there to work for Mr. Moïse, not the Martelly family.

"That's when the wife looks at me and says, 'Jovenel is a property. You don't seem to understand that,'" Ms. Antoine recounted. "I was shocked. When I asked her to repeat it, she then switched to French: 'Jovenel est une propriété.'"

The former first lady did not respond to a detailed list of questions for this article.

When he won and took over the presidency in 2017, Mr. Moïse felt suffocated by Mr. Martelly but remained loyal to him, his aides said.

Protests erupted the day before Mr. Moïse's funeral in July. The investigation into his assassination has stalled, U.S. officials say.

Mr. Moïse was unable to choose his own cabinet without the approval of the Martelly family or Mr. Saint-Rémy, they said. The Martellys would often call Mr. Moïse, yelling at him for his legislative initiatives, according to several people who overheard the conversations.

"The true leader wasn't the president," said Gabriel Fortuné, a close adviser to Mr. Moïse who died in an earthquake a day after speaking with The Times. "It was his godfather, Martelly. When we talk about the godfather we are talking about the

Italian way," he added, "the family."

Ms. Antoine acknowledged that Mr. Moïse often turned a blind eye to the corruption in his government, to avoid making enemies and advance his own initiatives.

"He would say, 'Let me feed them so they leave me alone. If they're making money, they'll let me do my electricity and build my roads,'" Ms. Antoine recalled him saying.

But Mr. Moïse's critics said he joined in the corruption. Before he came to power, the Haitian government was investigating Mr. Moïse, his wife and their company, Agritrans, for large amounts of money found in their bank accounts that could not be explained by the level of business they were generating, an official who worked on the case said.

Two government anti-corruption units also questioned why Mr. Martelly's government gave a \$6 million loan to Agritrans, a company with such a limited record. But when Mr. Moïse came to power, he fired the directors of the two anti-corruption units who worked on the inquiry.

'They Will Kill Me'

As Mr. Moïse settled into office, he soon realized that the withering control Mr. Martelly and his family exerted on the campaign trail extended to his personal security, several officials said.

Mr. Moïse inherited Dimitri Hérard, a pivotal member of Mr. Martelly's presidential security force who became the head of the police unit protecting Mr. Moïse's presidential palace.

Mr. Hérard was also a drug-trafficking suspect. In 2015, when a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship docked in Port-au-Prince with 1,100 kilograms of cocaine and heroin aboard, Mr. Hérard was seen commanding police officers in uniform to load the drugs into vehicles before speeding off with them, according to a witness and Keith McNichols, a former D.E.A. agent stationed in Haiti who led the agency's investigation into the missing drug shipment.

But Mr. Martelly shielded Mr. Hérard from being questioned by investigators in the case, a former United Nations official said.

Mr. Moïse deeply mistrusted Mr. Hérard, according to several presidential advisers and an international diplomat the president confided in. On at least one occasion, they said, Mr. Hérard was found spying on the president for Mr. Saint-Rémy, informing him about Mr. Moïse's meetings.

Mr. Hérard, now in detention as a suspect in the assassination, could not be reached for comment.

In January, Mr. Hérard ordered about 260 weapons from Turkey — including M4 carbines and handguns — making out the order to the presidential palace, Mr. Fortuné and a former security official said. But instead of arming his own unit, they said, Mr. Hérard sold most of the weapons to gangs and businesses.

"When Moïse found out about the weapons Hérard ordered, he wasn't surprised — he was scared," Mr. Fortuné said.

Mr. Moïse's relationship with the presidential security forces, already on tenterhooks, further soured. But that changed in February, when Mr. Hérard claimed to have foiled a coup attempt against Mr. Moïse. Suddenly, the distrust waned. Some former aides, like Ms. Antoine and Mr. Fortuné, wondered whether the supposed coup was a false flag, to throw off Mr. Moïse's suspicions about Mr. Hérard.

After the coup scare, Mr. Moïse went on the offensive, publicly blasting Haiti's oligarchs and political elite for trying to kill him, including in one of his final interviews with The Times before his death.

Behind the scenes, Haitian officials say, Mr. Moïse began working to take down his perceived enemies. He spoke with his closest aides and select officials to start compiling the dossier breaking down narcotics and weapons smuggling networks in Haiti, including Mr. Saint-Rémy, according to the people involved with the document.

In February, Josua Alusma, the mayor of Port-du-Paix and a close Moïse ally, ordered a crackdown on the eel trade, the industry dominated by Mr. Saint-Rémy. Many of the eels go to China, but the Haitian police are investigating the industry as a way to launder illicit profits.

"I don't like this business. It happens at night, do you know what I'm saying?" Mr. Alusma said. "There's no security."

He said the industry needed to be regulated and taxed. "People like Kiko go in and out of the city," he said, using Mr. Saint-Rémy's nickname. "But we are the ones here cleaning his trash," he added, referring to illegal weapons seized during a raid this year.

The same month, the president also started to discuss plans to nationalize a seaport owned by allies of Mr. Martelly, where several shipments of illegal weapons have been found and seized over the years, two senior Haitian officials said.

"Jovenel told me that he had an agenda that he wanted to implement but he couldn't because, he said, 'They will kill me,'" recounted a powerful politician who served as an informal aide to Mr. Moïse, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of his life. The port, he said, "was part of the plan."

Mr. Moïse also tried to push customs, despite considerable resistance, to start inspecting Mr. Saint-Rémy's shipments and charging taxes on his goods, according to several presidential aides, two senior security officials and an official at the customs department. Haitian economists estimate that the country loses about \$500 million a year because of corruption at customs.

Then, in mid-May, Dominican security forces arrested Woodley Ethéart, also known as Sonson Lafamilia, a close friend of Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy's. When Mr. Martelly was president in 2015, he stood by Mr. Ethéart after he was arrested on kidnapping charges.

This year, Mr. Ethéart still had a warrant out for his arrest and generally kept a low profile. But in May, he and Mr. Martelly took photos of themselves partying together in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic's capital, that were posted on social media, a senior Dominican official said.

The next day, Dominican forces arrested Mr. Ethéart and extradited him to Haiti.

Mr. Moïse was ecstatic, his aides said.

The president's phone buzzed with calls from Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy, but he refused to answer them, according to a close friend and a presidential adviser.

"Sonson Lafamilia is very close to the Martelly family," said Joverlein, Mr. Moïse's son. "It is possible that Martelly saw that arrest as some kind of disrespect, that my father was a traitor and was betraying the Martelly family."

Drug trafficking routes in Haiti's north also came under pressure. In the 1990s, little Cessna planes from Colombia landed on dirt airstrips on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. But as the population expanded, the landing strips became surrounded by slums. Poor residents realized the valuable illicit cargo the planes held and began raiding them, according to a security official.

So, about a decade ago, traffickers moved the airstrips north, to Savane Diane, a sprawling, isolated area. Since then, the drug trade has evolved and boomed. The planes no longer come solely from Colombia — Venezuela has become a big player, too, with family members of President Nicolás Maduro arrested by the D.E.A. in Haiti in 2015 for drug trafficking. The son of Honduras's former president was also arrested in Haiti by the D.E.A.

This year, Mr. Moïse approved an agro-industrial zone in Savane Diane, but when the project broke ground, officials found they were about three miles south of one of Haiti's most active airstrips for cocaine and heroin deliveries.

The small lake nearby was filled with fish, in an area where malnutrition is rampant, yet locals would not go near it. When The Times asked them why, farmers explained that human remains were often dumped there.

And when The Times went to the local airstrip, a farmer with a machete in his hand approached, asking if a drug delivery was happening so that he could get a bribe to look the other way.

Two jagged dirt strips — one path for each wheel — cut through waist-high grass. Yards from the airstrip lay the hull of a small plane that, residents say, crashed over the summer. The wreckage of another charred plane lay close by.

When the police cars that are often seen offloading the planes' cargo get stuck along the rough roads, local tractor drivers get paid a few dollars to tow them out, residents said. Before a plane comes, they added, farmers cut the grass around the airstrip and start fires in empty cans so pilots know where to land at night.

Mr. Moïse's aides said he became aware of the airstrip after a furious call from the D.E.A.

Between May and June, the airstrip in Savane Diane and another in Haiti's north hosted an inordinate amount of traffic, with at least a dozen planes coming through, potentially carrying thousands of kilos of cocaine, Haitian security officials say. In mid-June, the D.E.A. called the Haitian authorities, demanding to know why there was such an uptick, according to Haitian officials with knowledge of the communication.

Several of the planes had even stopped in Port-au-Prince to refuel in the middle of the night, when the airport was closed, they said.

When Mr. Moïse found out about the deliveries in mid-June, he was fuming, his aides said. Then came an order from the presidential palace: Destroy the airstrip.

But the local authorities refused to do it, according to several officials interviewed.

About a week later, Mr. Moïse was at home with his wife and two children when hit men burst into his home. They had been let into the presidential compound by Mr. Hérard's forces. In his initial testimony, Mr. Hérard said they stood down when the gunmen identified themselves as D.E.A. agents.

Not a single shot was fired between the assassins and Mr. Moïse's guards. As the gunmen stormed the residence, the president called Mr. Hérard and another security official to rescue him, his widow told The Times. No help came.

One of the men leading the assassins, Joseph Felix Badio, was a former D.E.A. informant who called the country's new prime minister, Ariel Henry, multiple times in the days just before and the hours right after the assassination, according to a copy of the police report. Mr. Henry, a close ally of Mr. Martelly, has denied any involvement in the killing.

Mr. Badio is still on the loose, but in the weeks after the assassination he was seen in bulletproof government vehicles, according to a security officer who was involved in the investigation.

Mr. Henry has stripped the government of Mr. Moïse's former allies. Last month, he appointed a new justice minister, Berto Dorcé — who, according to a D.E.A. investigation, bribed one of the judges overseeing the case of the Panamanian-flagged vessel with 1,100 kilos of drugs aboard. A former senior Haitian law enforcement official also said Mr. Dorcé once spent months in jail in connection with drug trafficking.

Mr. Dorcé did not answer a list of questions for this article. Mr. Martelly is in Miami, where he lives, mulling another presidential run, his associates say.

National elections will be held next year, and Mr. Martelly is considered a front-runner.

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