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BAY AREA

3 expatriate women sue Haitian rebel chief S.F. group files suit alleging rapes, beating by militias

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One woman was gang-raped twice for being a pro-democracy leader, another was beaten for speaking out after her husband disappeared at the hands of Haiti's oppressive military regime, and the third was raped by paramilitaries as a message to her activist husband.

All three women eventually fled to the United States to escape the military regime that ruled Haiti in the early 1990s.

This month, a San Francisco-based firm filed a lawsuit against Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, one of the leaders of the bloody coup that ousted former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and terrorized the island nation for four years.

The suit was filed in federal court in the Southern District of New York by the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and Accountability. It accuses Constant and his paramilitary group FRAPH (Revolutionary Front for the Advancement of Progress of Haiti) of rape, torture and murder.

Despite his controversial past, Constant has lived and worked openly in Queens, N.Y., for the last 10 years. Constant did not return a telephone call seeking comment for this story.

The U.S. government tried to deport Constant in 1995, but eventually suspended its efforts and released him from detention, said Matthew Eisenbrandt, litigation director for the center.

One of the victims, a woman in her mid-30s who asked that her name and location be withheld for fear of attacks against relatives still in Haiti, said they were filing the suit on behalf of all women who were tortured, raped and beaten by FRAPH.

Both she and her husband were Aristide supporters in the capital city of Port au Prince. She headed a female victims' rights organization.

In 1991, shortly after the coup, she says five soldiers went to her home, raped her, then took both her and her husband to jail. The couple were released six months later and went into hiding.

She says the second attack came in 1994 when she came out of hiding to visit her children. A group of FRAPH paramilitaries found her at a relative's house.

"They pointed to me and said 'You're the one we've been looking for,' " the woman said through an interpreter.

The paramilitaries raped her and her sister-in-law, who suffered severe internal injuries in the attack and died some time later, the woman said.

Eventually, her family was able to flee to the United States.

"They used to patrol neighborhoods and go door to door looking for pro- democracy activists," the woman said. "This (suit) is for all those who were attacked."

A wanted poster bearing Constant's face hangs on the wall of the center's office. The organization has brought similar suits on behalf of victims against perpetrators of war crimes in Bosnia, El Salvador and Chile, winning judgments ranging from \$4 million to \$54 million.

"We wish that there could be a jail sentence as a result of this case," said center staff attorney Moira Feeney.

"All three of them were victims of violence," said Feeney. "One of them was attacked because they were looking for her husband and when they couldn't find him they attacked her and left her for dead. It was a common practice by FRAPH, to do this to send a message."

All three women still have family members living in Haiti, said Feeney.

People in Haiti, the world's first black republic, have suffered natural disasters, political upheaval and extreme poverty in recent years.

Aristide, the first democratically elected president, was ousted in a 1991 coup. He was restored in 1994 by U.S. forces only to be ousted again last year by a combination of opposition groups, street gangs and former soldiers.

In September, at least 2,000 people were killed and hundreds more left homeless by floods. A U.N. peacekeeping force led by Brazil tried to re- establish order after Aristide's ouster, but the former soldiers have refused to disarm and still occupy police stations in the countryside, and continue to clash with gangs loyal to Aristide.

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