

Dems Query U.S. Role in Aristide Exile

by Ron Howell - Newsday

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Congressional Democrats criticized the Bush administration's handling of the crisis in Haiti yesterday and questioned whether the United States pushed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile.

"You didn't want a diplomatic solution to this problem. You wanted to get rid of Aristide," said Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-Far Rockaway).

Others said the Bush administration's failure to support Aristide sent a chilling signal to democratically elected governments.

Rep. Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, said people in this hemisphere were "watching this government turn its back on democracy The message is clear. This government will not stand up for a democratically elected head of state they do not like."

Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega was the target of the grilling yesterday at a hearing of House International Relations subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere.

Members of Congress wanted to know whether the United States was covertly involved in recent events that led Aristide to leave his country. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said she and other legislators hope to find how much money was spent recently by the CIA and other U.S. agencies operating in Haiti.

She and Rep. Charles Rangel (D-Harlem) also demanded that Noriega produce proof Aristide himself composed the document which U.S. officials say is a letter of resignation. "Was the letter of resignation composed by - not just signed by - but composed by President Aristide?" Schakowsky asked Noriega.

"I assume he wrote it," Noriega answered.

On Monday, Aristide made phone calls to some members of Congress, saying he had been taken out of Haiti the day before against his will and forced by U.S. diplomats and Marines to sign the document. He has ended up, at least temporarily, in the Central African Republic.

Schakowsky said she had reason to doubt the official U.S. version of events in Haiti Saturday

night. Schakowsky told Newsday in a telephone interview yesterday evening that she had spoken with Mildred Aristide, the president's wife, at 6 p.m. Saturday, "and there was absolutely no hint that they were going to leave."

"We are absolutely going to push for a full investigation," Schakowsky told Newsday.