

**Press Release from the Board of Directors of FOKAL
(Soros Foundation in Haiti)**

On Saturday February 14, 2004, the board of directors of the Fondation Connaissance & Liberté/Fondasyon Konesans ak Libète (FOKAL), the Soros foundation in Haïti, was holding its regular meeting at the foundation's office on Avenue Christophe in Port-au-Prince, the capital. At about 1:00 pm, a dozen policemen surrounded the foundation's building and pointed all guns in our direction. Some were in plain clothes and others in gray uniforms, but all were heavily armed and under the command of Inspector Jackson Bernard (who said his nickname was "Big Jack").

FOKAL's security guard reported to us that Bernard would give the foundation's director one minute to come outside and speak with him; otherwise, he said, his men would open fire.

FOKAL's executive director, Michele Pierre-Louis, decided to respond right away and went outside, accompanied by the general program coordinator, to meet the police. The inspector wanted to know whether a meeting was taking place inside and if so what kind of meeting it was.

Pierre-Louis explained that it was a board meeting, the kind of meeting that is held at least once every three months, generally on a Saturday morning. The answer appeared satisfactory and the inspector ordered his men out of the foundation's property.

The board decided to continue with the meeting as there were still a few points on the agenda. Five minutes later, however, the police detachment returned and deployed in the same manner. This time Inspector Bernard, accompanied by one of his men, came inside the building all the way to the office where our meeting was being held. He introduced himself to all present and stated he had received orders to come back and take the names of all present. Considering the obvious deployment of force, FOKAL board members felt that they had no choice but to comply. The inspector was given the complete list of all present (with their function on the board) on foundation letterhead and he left with his escort. At that point, the board agreed that it would be prudent to adjourn the meeting. Upon leaving the building, some of them noted that the same policemen had remained in surveillance of the premises for a while at the corner of an adjacent street.

The board of directors wishes to stress that FOKAL is an institution that has been working for the past eight years in Haiti in the fields of education, culture, and development. It received a special government recognition in 2000 (*reconnaissance d'utilité publique*) and has established institutional relations with partners such as: Agence Universitaire Francophone (AUF), the Monique Calixte Association in France, UNESCO, the National Archives and the National Library of Haiti, the State University of Haiti, Quisqueya University, and GRET-Haiti, as well as the U.S., French, Canadian,

and Japanese governments. It has also worked closely with many NGOs working in similar fields, including a network of 50 community libraries throughout the country and a considerable number of grassroots organizations (peasants, women, and youth) throughout the country. The foundation's board is representative of those different sectors.

FOKAL is a Haitian foundation, duly registered according to Haitian law, and a member of the network of foundations throughout the world financed by the Open Society Institute (OSI), which was created by philanthropist George Soros. It is with OSI funding that FOKAL was able to build the Resource Center of Avenue Christophe, which houses the Monique Calixte Library (BMC)—a community library that now has around 5,000 members (mostly children and youth from underprivileged neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince), but which has not been open since January 2004 because it is impossible to ensure young people's safety in the neighborhood.

The board protests in the strongest terms this illegal interruption of a meeting by armed policemen who treated the entire premises as enemy territory. Such actions were reminiscent of the dictatorship era more than a decade ago, when every meeting was suspect, spying and denunciations were common, and those who dared exercise their basic citizens's rights were often arrested or simply "disappeared."

The board reiterates to the staff of FOKAL and of the Monique Calixte Library, and to all partners and beneficiaries throughout the country, that it is committed to the struggle for freedom, learning, solidarity and justice, in complete respect for fundamental human rights.

Port-au-Prince, February 16, 2004

The signatures below are those of members of the board and executive office of FOKAL. These names are those that were communicated to the police on February 14.

Inette Durandis, *chair*

Dr. Daniel Henrys, *Vice chair*

Abner Septembre, *secretary*

Prof. Vertus Saint-Louis, *member*

Dr. Nicole Magloire, *member*

Patrick Vilaire, *member*

Danièle Magloire, *member*

Michèle D. Pierre-Louis, *executive director*

Lorraine Mangonès, *program coordinator*