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Haiti Under New Management

by LADB Staff

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UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called for a new UN mission in Haiti that would include 6,700 troops, 1,600 police, and others. He said he wants to turn the country into "a functioning democracy." The new troops would replace the 3,600-member US-led force now on the island. A phased-replacement process, to be completed by June 1, would effect the transfer without creating security gaps.

There have been ten international missions to Haiti in as many years. All have failed, according to UN special envoy to Haiti Reginald Dumas, because of lack of sustained commitment. The last, which ended in 2001, was "too brief and fraught with both international and domestic hindrances," said Annan's report to the Security Council.

However, where Dumas said the international community would have to invest at least 20 years in the process of bringing peace and raising living standards, Annan proposed only a period of two years for what he wants to call the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti. One advantage of the new mission will be that the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, which has refused to join the current force or to recognize the US-installed interim government in Haiti, might reconsider under a different mandate (see NotiCen, 2004-04-01).

Caribbean leaders have demanded that the UN General Assembly investigate the charge brought by deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide that the US staged the coup and forced him from the island (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). The US denies the charge, and Secretary of State Colin Powell has said he doesn't believe such an investigation would be of any use.

Annan's Aristide analysis

There seems little chance of the UN's backing a CARICOM desire for Aristide's return to power in Annan's 33-page report. In it, Annan accuses the president of having failed to advance the cause of democracy during his tenure and of having contributed to lawlessness and a drug trade. The report says Aristide allied himself with armed groups, "chimeres," to exercise his power. "These armed groups received financial assistance and were given a free hand to intimidate political opponents and to engage in organized crime, including narcotics trade," Annan told the Security Council in the report.

Aristide's fatal mistake, said Annan, was to disband the army after his 1995 return to power and then fail to integrate the troops into civilian life or to preserve their military pensions. This planted "the seeds for future civil unrest," he said.

Lula wants hemispheric lead

Brazil has offered to take command of the new force with a six-month commitment of 1,470 troops, Brazilian Defense Minister Jose Viegas said in early April, but President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva more recently conditioned the offer on "a firm commitment by the international community to rebuild Haiti." The Brazil offer was reportedly originally floated by France, one of the countries whose troops are now in Haiti, and it received quick approval at the UN. Another of Lula's conditions was that the new force would "only make sense if closely in tune with the countries of the region."

Perhaps most significant, though, was Lula's bid for "a closer coordination between the Security Council and UN organizations involved in the physical reconstruction and the recovery of political and social institutions of the countries. Lula broached this idea in the context of the "tragedies that the Middle East and Iraq live today." He said these tragedies reinforced his conviction "of the relevance of an international order based on law, multilateralism, and the United Nations." Haiti thus becomes the forum for a clash of ideas represented by Brazil on one side and US unilateralism on the other.

The US gave signs of discomfort with the arrangement as outlined by Brazil. A diplomat who refused to be named told reporters that the US fully expected to continue its involvement on the ground in Haiti. This means the deployment of scarce troops when the US is scratching for every last soldier it can find for Iraq.

The most vociferous opposition to Brazil's leadership in Haiti is coming not from the US, but from Brazil, where unions, nongovernmental organizations, and legislators are protesting the move. Lula still has to get approval from his Congress to send the troops to lead the peacekeeping force. In the popular sector, sociologist Emir Sader and geographer Demetrio Magnoli, both protest leaders, base their opposition on the premise that foreign intervention in Haiti legitimizes the undemocratically established caretaker government.

Within Lula's own party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), Deputy Ivan Valente said, "Brazil's intention could be good, but Aristide was thrown out by force. Sending troops legitimizes the Bush policy of intervention and puts Brazilian lives at risk. Lula's decision is imprudent." Opposition Deputy Jose Thomaz Nono of the allied Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL) observed that sending troops to perform police functions in Haiti is precisely what the army is avoiding doing in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Others have criticized the cost, estimated at around US\$100 million, as prohibitive in light of Brazil's pressing social needs.

As Brazil debates its peacekeeping future, Chile is already in Haiti, part of the first-phase US-led force. Chilean troops are taking up positions in central Haiti where about 400 armed rebels have been in control. The Chileans are scheduled to deploy to Hinche, a town of 100,000 at a strategic central crossroads. A Chilean military spokesman has said that former Haitian Army Master Sgt. Joseph Jean-Baptiste, leader of the rebel force, has agreed to the change of guard. "He is ready to allow the Chilean forces to deploy and do patrols," said Lt Col. Renato Rondanelli.

Peacekeepers dealing directly with rebels

The peacekeepers reportedly must negotiate directly with rebels because the interim government has no influence with them. There is no question of police confronting rebels, as, in Hinche, there are only 15 demoralized officers. As the peacekeepers negotiated power sharing with the rebels, Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue negotiated with former Cabinet minister Leslie Voltaire and other officials of Aristide's La Fanmi Lavalas party regarding the naming of a Lavalas representative on a provisional electoral council. Latortue committed himself to elections early next year, timed so that whoever wins could take office on Feb. 7, 2005, when Aristide's term expires. After a nine-hour bargaining session in which Lavalas demanded an end to repression of party members by the government as well as other guarantees, a document was drawn up.

Another demand was an end to a prohibition against Lavalas members leaving the country. The text of the document was not released, but Latortue said agreement had been reached on everything except the naming of the representative to the council. "They said they would do it as soon as possible but that's not good enough," he said. He would, however, "keep the door open for them if they want to come."

On the matter of police, meanwhile, efforts to recruit new officers were not entirely successful. Police already on board felt it necessary to fire tear gas and use batons to beat back hundreds of aspirants who stormed the entrance of the police academy in Port-au-Prince. US Marines came to the aid of the besieged cops and the recruiting drive was cancelled after several people were injured. The government had intended the recruitment to replace officers who fled their posts on Feb. 29 in the face of advancing rebels. The government fired about 150 of those who fled when the chips were down, but couldn't find the others, who are said to have left the country.

In view of the apparent need for law enforcement, would-be recruits were surprised by their reception. "We were shoved back; the police attacked us," said Louis Hubert. "There were lots of gunshots. There was also tear gas. Plus, they beat us with their batons." Hubert is an electrician and plumber by trade, but like most Haitians, is out of work and desperate. The following day, the process was repeated with no lessons learned. The pool of applicants swelled from 4,000 the day before to 15,000. Again police applied tear gas and batons, but this time, 23-year-old Jerry Prophete fell and was trampled to death. Another 23 people were injured, eight hospitalized.

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