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Changing Missions in Haiti

by LADB Staff

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With the memory of the failed UN peacekeeping mission of the 1990s looming like the black clouds that have dumped flood and death on Haiti in past days, the UN flag was hoisted up a parade-ground flagpole and a new mission began with the invocation, "The stakes are high; this time lets get it right." And with the memory of an elected government sent packing in February still fresh, a US-installed prime minister whose government is recognized nowhere in the Caribbean told Haitians to "seize this opportunity" to foster democracy (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18, 2004-04-01).

Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue also asked the UN's help in disarming gangs and former soldiers so that elections scheduled for next year can go off with a minimum of violence and with some hope of ending the string of coups more than 30 that have punctuated the nation's 200-year history. Heartfelt though it all may have been, the ceremony marking the changeover from US-led occupation to UN mission was something of a sham.

The 1,900 US troops, the main contingent of the multinational force holding the country together, is not going anywhere. It will remain for about a month, and most of the 6,700 UN peacekeepers have not even arrived. Small contingents from Brazil, Nepal, Chile, Peru, and some others were present for the ceremony. The official transfer of command is scheduled for June 20; the last US soldier is set to leave the country June 30.

The current UN mandate for the Haiti mission is six months, a period almost absurd in the light of history, but Adama Guindo, who will head the mission, spoke of a long-term commitment to transform the country (see NotiCen, 2004-04-22). "You can't just fix the problem and run," he said. For many, perhaps most, Haitians, troops are troops. Haitians interviewed at a market on the day of the changeover said they were unaware of it. Said Paul-Lucner Camilos, a welder, "I'm hoping the troops can assist us with basic necessities. If they can do that, I don't care where they're from."

Everything's going up

People have reported that, since the revolt that removed the elected government, they have less food, less money, and less hope less as a result of rising waters than food prices. They are talking about the price of rice in a country where they say, "Rice is life." Many eat just one meal a day, says The New York Times, and the price of a 50-kg sack has doubled since January, from US\$22.50 to US \$45. Said Clermathe Baron, who sells rice by the sack, "Life for the people of Haiti was better under Aristide because rice was less expensive. Even though it's more expensive now, I make the same as I did before. These high prices...aren't to anyone's advantage except maybe a few big importers in the Customs House. They always seem to have money."

Another food seller, Nadia Casmir, told the Times, "Things were better before; I'm not making a living. I've had to raise my prices, but people have less money, so they can't buy what we are

selling." Haitians generally echo the parting words of their former president upon leaving Jamaica for refuge in South Africa May 31. "The level of suffering has dramatically increased in Haiti," said Aristide. Business-class critics dismissed this rhetoric, pointing out that Aristide kept rice prices down by corrupt monopolistic practices. Haiti used to grow rice, but foreign imports, environmental destruction, and population growth have put that in the past.

Now Haiti buys US rice from Arkansas, Louisiana, and California the most expensive in the world, and, said Minister of Commerce Danielle St. Lot, "The price on the international market is growing every day." Prices are soaring largely because the US needs to feed people in other, larger places where its armies are deployed. "The American government has been buying a lot of rice for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq," said Haitian commodities importer Jean-Michel Cherubin. Hearts and minds and helicopters Meanwhile, nature has given US and French troops more to do than bring order to a headless nation. As the only nations with troops in Haiti that have helicopters, they have brought aid to otherwise unreachable villages in the aftermath of floods that have so far killed more than 1,700 and sent an as-yet-uncounted number missing. By May 31, the copters had airlifted more than 50,000 kg of food and drinking water and had evacuated injured from submerged towns.

US troops received a mixed welcome at best when they first arrived in Haiti and in the interim killed some people and failed or neglected to disarm rebels. Failing to take away the guns is largely credited as the root of the failure of the last UN mission. But with the floods came a new purpose, and now the marines prepare to leave with a new sense of accomplishment. They have also cleared mountains of garbage, repaired schools, and donated school supplies.

The new force, to be led by Brazil, has a different mission from the one departing. Brazilian Army Gen. Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira has already warned Haitians, however, not to expect miracles. "Our first priority is helping the Haitian people," he said. "It will not be an easy mission, but we are prepared to do the work it takes." Aside from maintaining a shaky peace, the mission will attempt to train a police force short on equipment and personnel and try to get some development projects going.

Part of why the task will not be easy is that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has only obtained a fraction of the US\$35 million he asked for to fund a long-term commitment. Neither money nor guarantees of money are in place to extend the mission past its current six-month stay. Nor is there certainty that the force will reach the 6,700-person strength advertised. Together, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina have pledged up to 2,700 troops.

Other countries, like Rwanda and Nepal, have promised 750 each, but they are both in domestic economic difficulties. The UN is in difficulties, too. The Haiti mission is just one of three to be deployed, bringing to 18 the number of missions now at work worldwide. By the end of 2004, the number of peacekeeping soldiers under blue berets or helmets will rise from the current 53,500 to more than 70,000. The annual peacekeeping budget will nearly double to US\$4 billion. Most of these troops come from poor nations, and they have begun to complain that the UN has fallen behind in payments for their support.

In December 2003, the UN owed US\$439 million to 71 countries for this purpose. Some of the countries that signed onto this Haiti mission, Nepal and Uruguay, are among the heaviest suppliers of troops to world peacekeeping. A South Asian diplomat speaking anonymously to a reporter said, "Developing nations are virtually subsidizing UN peacekeeping operations. We cannot afford to continue providing troops without quick reimbursements."

Uruguay is owed US\$14.4 million and has not been reimbursed for more than a decade for troop deployments in the 1990s. The funds come from assessed contributions from the 191 UN member states. As of December 2003, states were in arrears for peacekeeping by more than US\$1.1 billion. The biggest single defaulter was the US, which owes US\$482 million.

The trickle of replacements is not lost on the local population. Said Marie Andre, from the flooded town of Fond Verrettes, "I don't understand what they're coming to do yet; if they're supposed to provide security, where are they?" The answer is that many still await deployment in Nepal, Rwanda, Uruguay, Canada, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Guatemala, and Peru. Ecuador is to send 12 helicopters.

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