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Haiti: Battleground For Hemispheric Power Shift

by LADB Staff

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In a partial reversal of policy, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) expressed in mid-July a desire to have Haiti return as an active participant in the organization.

Barbados Minister of Foreign Relations Billie Miller told the media, "We want to see the return of Haiti to the activities of Caricom as soon as possible," after three months of suspension (see NotiCen, 2004-04-01). Her statement followed a meeting she headed in Port-au-Prince that was attended by foreign ministers of Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana. The meeting sought to ease tense relations between Caricom and the US-appointed interim government of Gerard Latortue. Caricom had questioned the legitimacy of that government.

Besides interim Prime Minister Latortue, interim President Boniface Alexandre was at the meeting, as were political-party leaders and others from civil-society organizations. Miller said, "The exchanges allowed us to dispel misunderstandings and understand the situation better." The statements do not mean, however, that Caricom has recognized the interim government; it hasn't.

Caricom has requested an investigation into the circumstances of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's departure from office and from the country last February. It has asked the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS) to determine whether the departure was voluntary, as the US claims, or forced, as Aristide has repeatedly asserted (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04).

Supporters of the interim regime have suggested that Caricom is interfering in the internal affairs of the country, and Miller was careful to deny that, saying the intent is to contribute to "a credible electoral process," with "respect for the state of law." She said that Aristide, now in exile in South Africa, "is the past; let's work together to strengthen the region." Other speculation has it that Caricom has conditioned recognition on the release of Aristide's prime minister, Yvon Neptune. Miller denied that, but did not deny that a condition of recognition might be a guaranteed election. Other conditions, say recent reports, include disarming the rebel forces that overthrew Aristide. The delegation Miller led will present a report to Caricom that might include recommendations, but not about recognition.

In marked contrast to the vituperation of recent months, the public leave-taking between Miller and Latortue included a handshake and a warm embrace. Apparently, there is no bar to Haiti's participation in the regional organization without recognition of its government.

Upon his return home, Foreign Affairs Minister Knowlson Gift of Trinidad and Tobago told his local press he is satisfied that Haiti should participate fully in Caricom as soon as the member heads of government approve the move. His understanding was that the question of free and fair elections was ensured. The motives lie elsewhere. Among the motives for Caricom's change of heart is the interest of Chile, which has a contingent of soldiers in Haiti on a peacekeeping mission

under Brazilian leadership. Chilean President Ricardo Lagos had a one-hour meeting with Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson during a short stopover on his way to Port-au-Prince. Lagos later told Jamaican reporters, "Haiti is part of Caricom, and Caricom has been able to give a good example to Latin America of the meaning of democracy and the rule of law."

Behind that almost platitudinous statement is the fact that, according to Chilean political scientist Ricardo Israel, Chile's involvement in Haiti and its interest in the institutional and economic reconstruction of the island nation "marked a radical change in its foreign policy." Israel told Notimex, "There is no doubt Haiti is indicating a radical change in the way Chile perceives the world." For this analyst, the Lagos visit is strong evidence of his view because it takes policy to the highest level. "The Foreign Ministry is not at the level of the objectives of the president, and that could frustrate his initiatives, which also depend on the financial support of Europe." Further, "Chile has established a relationship it has never before had with the Caribbean countries, which have become spokespeople for the Haitian case," said Israel. He took the Jamaican visit to mean the new relationship has its basis in the fact that "the Caribbeans remain convinced of something that probably is true, that France and the United States removed [Aristide] by force."

Haiti: epicenter of a tectonic shift

Interestingly, Israel's analysis corresponds closely to a similar observation of Brazil made in NotiCen (see NotiCen, 2004-04-22) concluding that "Haiti thus becomes the forum for a clash of ideas represented by Brazil on one side and US unilateralism on the other." Lagos is in a position to deal with the US regarding Haiti in a way that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil is not, because of his overt challenges to US domination of the region.

Now Israel makes the case that Lagos leads the South American charge into the Caribbean. "There have been many international interventions in Haiti, and all have failed for the same [reason]: security is rapidly re-established, they have an election, the troops leave, and the next day the militias dig up the weapons," he said. The difference now, said Israel, is that "it's about a long-term commitment beyond the possibilities of Chile and of Latin America for which Europe must obligate itself to confront the issues of poverty and create institutions that do not exist."

Without that long-term investment, there will be no alteration of the desperate conditions of Haiti. "The problem is that the international community repudiates itself with great facility," he said. To demonstrate that "is a matter of looking at all the promises made after hurricanes or civil wars." He added, "The key is the financing of what is central: development, social justice, creation and strengthening of democratic institutionalities." If conditions on the ground at the moment the Chilean analyst spoke were indicative, his premise that, without long-term initiatives, "nothing is going to change and everything will remain the same" is hard to contradict. Even with the peacekeepers present, rebels rule the night.

In Mirebalais, the still-armed, uniformed insurgents whose uprising led to Aristide's ouster control the countryside. The interim government has ordered them to give up their guns but has done nothing overt to force disarmament or to confront the leaders, even with the UN in their corner. The rebels brazenly stake out their turf. "We have no problem with the peacekeepers, but they have no

right to take our arms," said Fritz Pierre, a patrol leader in the town of 10,000, 60 km northeast of the capital. The government wrote Pierre's leaders giving them until Sept. 15 to turn in their weapons. If they do not, said the note, the police will arrest them.

Other than the letter, Pierre and company have no reason to believe that the police will arrest them. Police actually patrol alongside the rebels for protection because they are outgunned not only by the rebels but by criminals as well. Latortue, at whose directive the letter was sent, has called them "freedom fighters." Besides, the rebels see redundancy and inefficiency in laying down arms.

Many of them are former soldiers in the now disbanded army, and they have every expectation that the army will soon be reconstituted. "The military is always the military. The president can dissolve it, but the Constitution is still there, guaranteeing its presence," said Pierre. At the very least, Pierre, if he really was a soldier, may be entitled to pensions and benefits. The government has a panel charged with determining who among the rebels really was a soldier and who is just running around with stolen guns and soldier suits.

The UN peacekeepers have not yet determined their role in disarming these people who have so far killed an estimated 300 Haitians. Mission chief Juan Gabriel Valdes has said security is a priority, but he has given no indication of how it is to come about. Col. Rodrigo Carrasco, commander of the Chilean troops, said the matter was under discussion, but that, even though the rebels are not supposed to be armed and uniformed, "our role is not to use force unnecessarily, and they are doing nothing bad." Many Haitians, however, including reporters, have gone into hiding from the rebels, fearing for their lives because, as one told the media, "I wasn't on their side."

Florida to the fore

In the US, meanwhile, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has taken up the question of financing a Haitian recovery, establishing a Haiti Advisory Group in mid-July. Not to be outdone by South American initiatives, no one has been named to the group yet, but applications are being accepted. "We're trying to find people who have an interest in seeing Haiti grow and improve and who share the governor's interest in seeing Florida become a leader in the process," said governor's office spokesman Jacob DiPietre. The governor visited Haiti in June, returning to describe the country as a place with tremendous poverty. He also said the people were looking for hope.

Reports from Florida indicate Bush met with a small group of Haitian-Americans to discuss his plans and received a favorable response. Some of the Haitian-Americans asked the governor to persuade his brother, US President George W. Bush, to grant Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to Haitian refugees. Gov. Bush said he is inclined to support TPS, but needs more information about it. At about the same time, in Washington, organizers of an international donors' conference said they hoped to raise US\$924 million to jump-start the Haitian economy.

The organizers include the European Commission, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), World Bank, and UN. Hindsight, insight, oversight The last time such a group was formed was about ten years ago, after the US invaded Haiti to restore elected President Aristide. The international effort raised an estimated US\$2.6 billion at that time. This time, said the donors, they will require

better oversight of spending and proof of results. Also, they will seek to continue spending after the crisis passes. They were reported to have "voiced determination that the relief effort would not be dragged down by corruption, political intractability, and international impatience, as in the past."

World Bank country director for the Caribbean Caroline Anstey said, "There is a fundamental belief that there is a two-year window of opportunity now to put in place some economic reforms, some political reforms, some institutional reforms, that will pave the way for Haiti's recovery." Anstey's view of what went wrong last time financially does not differ significantly from Israel's analysis.

Money dried up steadily during the decade, from a high of US\$611 million in 1995 to a low of US \$136 million in 2002. The Bush administration cut off most of its aid in 2002. "The donors failed to coordinate their activities, failed to look at a strategic overall plan, and really became too involved with putting their flags on their own pet projects," she said. But this time, said Adolfo Franco, Latin American director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), things are going to be different. "We're in this for the long haul, as long as we have the same commitment from our Haitian partners," he said. Another difference is that this time Latin America is challenging the US for influence in the Caribbean.

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