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African Union To Haiti: Aristide's Influence And Differing Ideas On Resurrection Of The Country

by LADB Staff

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Calling Haiti "an African country outside Africa," African Union (AU) commission chairman Alpha Kumar Konare said the AU is ready to restore stability and pave the way to elections. The AU entry into the international dilemma posed by the removal from office last February of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide is in no small part a manifestation of Aristide's continuing influence in Haiti.

Konare's comments came immediately after he met with South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki and Aristide, who is in exile in South Africa. The chairman of the 53-member body, who is just back from a visit to Haiti, said, "The AU wants to help create conditions in which a new government can be democratically elected in Haiti." Presidential elections are set for Nov. 27. The new government would assume power in February 2006, the date to coincide with the end of Aristide's term, had he been permitted to serve it.

Konare said, "Mr. Aristide has agreed to such a mission, and he understands the role the AU can play with other organizations like CARICOM and the United Nations." The strategy that Konare described calls for the creation of a nonviolent national dialogue "where none of the political forces are excluded," this in reference to indications that Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party might not participate.

Lavalas key to legitimacy Juan Gabriel Valdes, the top UN envoy to Haiti, is similarly concerned with full participation. Lavalas inclusion is crucial to the legitimacy of a new permanent government and to its stability. Valdes, however, is apparently no great fan of Aristide. "It is clear that the seeds of violence that have always been there in Haitian society were very much sown during the Aristide period. The level of tensions rose, and confrontation and hatred between Haitians was very evident....They polarized the country," he said.

Much the opposite is happening now. UN forces in the country, which now number somewhere around 7,400 soldiers and police (see NotiCen, 2004-11-04), has been contending, largely unsuccessfully, not primarily with Aristide supporters, but with rebels and former soldiers who participated in driving Aristide from office. These gangs now occupy police stations in the countryside. Aristide supporters, meanwhile, organized in the capital and elsewhere, have refused to disarm until the rebels do. In an interview with a reporter, Valdes insisted that the Brazilian-led UN force not the rebels controls the country.

Redefining opposition, lowering expectations

The official also took the opportunity to define the opposition. "One of the myths that continues to persist, I would say with all due respect, within many experts on Haiti is that these military [forces]

of today are the same that overthrew Aristide in the 1990s. They have nothing to do with that. They are people without jobs who kept weapons and who should be disarmed (see NotiCen, 2004-10-21)."

Valdes explained that the UN mission is not to eliminate all violence in Haiti, a goal he termed "practically impossible," but rather, "We want to cut the links between the political groups and the violent groups, or the business groups and the violent groups, because this, of course, allows this violence to reproduce itself permanently. This is not easy to do, but I think we are making some progress." Valdes said that some political leaders are using armed groups to increase their own power but that there has been a recent reduction in violence and insecurity, and attempts to destabilize the country have been overcome. The country is, by any measure, unstable.

Carjackings and shootings are common in Port-au-Prince, and armed marauders burn vehicles at will. The chief advisor to interim Prime Minister Gerard Letortue, Raymond Lafontant, was shot recently in an attempted carjacking. Valdes is former Chilean ambassador to the UN, and his country has more than 500 troops deployed to the Haiti mission. As he inveighs in support of a widely attended election, however, his countryman, Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker, added some caveats.

Speaking to reporters in mid-January, Walker reminded the world that a successful outcome depends more on internal political accord than on anything else. Even though "nothing is guaranteed," he said, nothing will be possible without a truce among the political entities. Another ingredient essential for the realization of mission objectives is the delivery of a more than US\$1 billion aid package that has still not arrived.

With regard to the legitimacy of any new government, Walker agreed that Lavalas must take part, but even with that, "We don't know for certain what total level of legitimacy the political process will achieve. It will depend on the ability of the government to reach this political accord, this governability pact," he said. This will be no small feat. There are more than 80 registered parties.

The US role, past, present, future

The list of ingredients for a successful transition to stable government would not be complete without a sense of how the US intends to behave toward Haiti through the transition and beyond. The most recent evidence on that question came to the fore in an exchange between US Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) and Condoleezza Rice at the Senate committee hearing on Rice's confirmation as secretary of state. Nelson said to Rice, "Haiti is a disaster. And it's going to continue to be a disaster until we get engaged and do something seriously, along with particularly the other nations of the Western Hemisphere, financially and politically to help them. I have had a difference of opinion with the administration. I think you did have a policy of regime change, and although Aristide was a bad guy, you know, it's kind of hard to say we support democracy and elections and then we go and push him out, but that's done. Looking forward, we're getting close to the authorized support now under the UN peacekeeping force of 6,700 military and 1,600 civilian police. Do you think that's an adequate number?"

Rice responded in part, "The question has really been about more what can that force do. I think the expansion a bit of a more aggressive stance by that force in going into areas that are particularly violent and dealing with the violence and the militias in those areas is probably really the question that we have to deal with. I'm glad, Senator, you mentioned the police forces, because in the long run, what really will help Haiti is that it needs a professional, civilian police force that can be counted on to enforce law, not to break law. And we have, as you well know, dispatched civilian police trainers from the United States, and from other places, to try and engage in that activity. But I agree completely. Unfortunately, Haiti seems to be a place where natural and manmade disasters have come together in a really terrible way for the Haitian people. They do have a new chance now. They have a transitional government that is trying to arrange elections in the fall. We need to support that process."

On the matter of the US removal of Aristide (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04), Rice said, "We probably dodged a bullet in the earlier days with the ability to get Aristide out peacefully, because he had lost the ability to control that country, to govern authoritatively in that country, but we have a lot of work ahead of us in Haiti. I would be the first to admit it."

-- End --