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Preval Inaugurated; Haitian-born Canadian Governor General Promises Closer Ties

by Mike Leffert

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Haiti inaugurated its first elected president since the ouster of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) in February 2004. Rene Preval officially took on the job May 14, calling for peace among his countrymen and women, telling them, "If we don't talk, then we will only fight." Preval replaces a US-installed and supported interim government nominally headed by Interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and President Boniface Alexandre.

Bidding the two goodbye drew some of the loudest applause of the ceremony. Both figures were highly unpopular among the poor. Preval faces a daunting task as president. The call for peace was not inaugural rhetoric; violence between factions and parties has left him very little to work with by way of institutions and structures.

The judicial system is in shambles. As if Preval needed to be reminded of this, prisoners demanding their freedom rioted at the national penitentiary, just a few blocks from the Parliament, where the new president took the oath of office. Gunshots from the riot could be heard and inmates on the roof seen, holding up the bodies of two prisoners. Police and UN troops surrounded the prison and the rioting was quelled, but it was not lost on anyone that the prisons were filled with political prisoners, many of them Aristide supporters sympathetic to Preval, during the interim government.

Others have been imprisoned for years without being charged of any crime. The riot aside, Preval may get some relief from the chaos in the short term. Graham Muir, head of the UN police UNPOL, noted, "We went from a very difficult fall and winter, then all of a sudden [since the elections] things became very calm in comparison." Muir commands 1,870 police from 38 different countries. "That doesn't mean there isn't some localized conflict and some violence, after all that's why we're here. But in general, Haiti is reasonably stable right now."

Muir cautioned, however, "The million-dollar question is how long that will last. I don't have an answer to that. We're hopeful it's going to last."

Muir is Canadian, and it has been reported that Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC) is expected to lift a travel advisory warning Canadians against traveling to Haiti. Said Francois Montour, chief of Canadian cooperation at the Canadian Embassy, "I think it's realistic to think that within three or four years we could have secure areas in a welcoming country, where we would have Canadian tourists, Americans, or others."

Agreeing that one of Preval's highest priorities is restoring a functioning justice system, UN envoy to Haiti Juan Gabriel Valdes wrote in an editorial in *Le Devoir*, a Montreal newspaper, "In Haiti,

impunity is quasi total for many criminals who roam free, while the innocent and those wrongly accused of a crime stagnate in prisons."

Canada and Haiti, a personal connection

Canada is invested in a successful term for Preval, not only economically but emotionally as well. The country's Governor General Michaëlle Jean is Haitian-born. As Canada's envoy to Preval's swearing-in, Jean was the hit of the show wherever she went. The swearing-in is a three-part process. There is the actual administering of the oath of office at the Parliament, a mass at Port-au-Prince's cathedral, and the address to the nation from the balcony of the presidential palace. Everywhere she went Jean had front-row seating. When she walked through the cathedral she was given a standing ovation, eclipsing other dignitaries and celebrities. Preval made a point of mentioning her and praising her in his speeches, as did other Haitian officials.

The inauguration was highly emotional for Jean. It was important for her to see her native country return to, or at least have a new chance at, democratic rule, and she made that known in her comments to the media. The connection between the two countries now has the possibility of being significantly strengthened with Jean as the link.

The office of governor general is largely ceremonial in Canada, but Jean said she has every intention of using her influence on Haiti's behalf. Staying on after the inauguration, Jean said on May 15 that she has the ear of Prime Minister Stephen Harper regarding Canada's policy toward Haiti, and she plans on bending that ear. "Know that Canada intends to play a leading role in the reconstruction of Haiti. Notably, we hope to promote harmony in the country, healthy governance, and the revival of the economy. Help to the population in key sectors like security, health, and education, as well as respect for fundamental freedoms, is also close to our hearts," she said at a reception for Canadian police serving in the country. Jean dismissed the idea, commonly held in Canada, that she had been sent to Haiti just to represent her adopted country at the ceremony.

"I am here to present him [Harper] with even more information and more answers. It's not a lost cause. Things are happening here, and it is worth supporting those projects, and many of them happen to be Canadian projects." She continued, "If I was only here for a ceremony, I would be gone by now. Their ceremony is over; I'm not doing that. I'm taking the time to visit grassroots organizations, people who work here on a daily basis, who support Haitians with their needs, who accompany them." Even regarding a visit to her mother's hometown, Jean was adamant on that point. "I'm not on a holiday here. I'm here just to really see what is really happening and to help you to see it and to help Canadians to know about it."

Jean's itinerary reflected her assertions. She met with a chamber of commerce, students, missionaries, women's groups, and small merchants. Wherever she went crowds turned out to greet her, and her efforts were well-covered in the Canadian media. She spoke sometimes in French, sometimes in Creole. She said she was going to change the view Canadians have of Haiti.

In the process, she also appeared to be changing the view Haitians have of Canada. Saphir Fanfan, a student at Université Notre Dame de Haiti, said he had never heard of Michaëlle Jean before, but

"I was surprised by how much she cared about Haiti's problems, the problems of violence in Haiti." Jean was born in Port-au-Prince in 1957, and she was 11 years old when her family fled the regime of Papa Doc Duvalier (1957-1971) and settled in Montreal. She has returned several times during the years, but this is her first visit since becoming governor general last year.

Competition for long-term financial support

The Canadian connection will help Preval; there is little doubt of that. But he and his country also need money. World Bank Director for the Caribbean Caroline Anstey praised Preval as "a great beacon of hope," while cautioning that international donors must move quickly. "Haiti will need long-term support and long-term resources to really be able to enter onto a path of sustainable development and break what has been a cycle of conflict, instability, and poverty," she said. The International Cooperation Framework (ICF) will meet May 26 in Brasilia to discuss Preval's urgent request for funds.

Anstey said Preval had warned the 26-member group that Haiti's chances at democracy and development could be eroded by a lack of international support. "I think there is a very strong feeling that the window of opportunity is there, but it's not going to be there forever. Both the new Haitian authorities and the donors need to move fast," she said.

Since July 2004, the ICF has paid out about US\$700 million of the US\$1.08 billion it pledged for Haiti, and far more is needed. Anstey observed that Haiti is not the only desperate, unstable nation in the world, and they are all competing for the same pool of international funds. "There is a lot of attention right now, rightly so, on Sudan, on Liberia, and there's continued attention on Afghanistan," and Haiti's experience with these funders has not been great. "Donors have had a history in Haiti of coming in with big money and, within two years, pulling out. We need to see that spigot of aid turned on and remain on," said Anstey.

Preval has, by most accounts, been on top of his country's lengthy list of needs, and appears to have been doing all he could as president-elect to line up resources (see NotiCen, 2006-04-20). The quest has had him hobnobbing with rich folks, and even this presents problems in the fractured nation he intends to govern. He is known as a champion of the poor, and it was the poor who elected him, and now that constituency has shown signs of nervousness as they see their president cozying up to the Haitian wealthy elite. These light-skinned upper classes were Preval's most powerful opponents during the campaign.

As the impoverished masses sweltered behind a fence surrounding the presidential palace, Preval spent his first hours in office inside, among the wealthy and the diplomatic community. This was not what the poor wanted to see, and when told that they would only be allowed to watch the inaugural address from behind cement barriers far from the palace gates, that was not what they wanted to hear. They surged forward, ignoring police orders; some of those in front being squashed against the gates, where police pushed them back. "We voted for Preval, now they're telling us that we can't see him deliver his inaugural speech," complained Marline Joinville from the crowd. "Those who used to kill us, who used to try to prevent Preval from becoming president, are inside."

Joinville and the crowd were even less favorably impressed after the address, with a party in the gardens of the palace attended by former dictator Prosper Avril (1988-1990) and the reviled Interim Prime Minister Latortue. "Preval should bar those people from leaving the country and arrest them," said Lesly Cherubin, who wore a t-shirt with Preval's picture on it. "The bourgeoisie wants to hijack the president. They are all over him, while we, who elected him, can't even see him."

The crowd was also disenchanted with the presence of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, brother of US President George W. Bush and US envoy to the ceremony. Brother Bush said his country had committed US\$200 million to Haiti for the coming year and more could be authorized. The US presence brought up the issue of Aristide and the possibility of his return from exile. Although Preval has said Aristide, with whom he was once allied, has the right to return (see NotiCen, 2006-02-23), US officials have warned Preval not to allow it.

But the crowd, this one outside the Parliament, had a different view of the matter. "Whether they want it or not, Aristide should come back," chanted the throng. Also heard were "Aristide's blood is our blood," and "We want him back." Crowds also shouted, "Long live Preval," but that could change, said analysts, if Aristide's return is seen as being blocked. In this very early going, Preval seems capable of balancing the fractious interests of his compatriots.

His first official act appeared to counter the discord. He signed an accord with Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, integrating Haiti into Petrocaribe, the oil pact that supplies Caribbean and other countries with fuel under preferential terms. In a statement, Rangel said Haiti would receive 100,000 barrels of oil in its first shipment under the pact.

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