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Haiti Gets Help From Venezuela And Cuba; President Rene Preval Must Tread Lightly To Keep U.S. In Line

by Mike Leffert

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The Western Hemisphere's poorest country, Haiti, got a much-needed hand from its neighbors on March 12, when Cuban and Venezuelan officials signed an aid package with President Rene Preval. An accord worth somewhere between US\$20 million and US\$120 million depending on how the accounting is done was signed by Preval, President Hugo Chavez, and Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo. Additional money, perhaps as much as US\$1 billion, has been reported in some press accounts, but Venezuelan sources have not verified that, and there are indications the information may be false. The aid is destined for the most essential of Haiti's needs health, education, economy, and energy.

For Chavez, "The essential part of this strategy is the incorporation of Haiti into ALBA [Alternativa Bolivariana para los pueblos de America]." Haiti joins Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, and prospective members Nicaragua and Ecuador in the organization Chavez created to offer an alternative to the neoliberal policies currently dominating the region, policies whose cornerstone is privatization of state entities and whose keystone is free-trade agreements. This was Chavez's first visit to Haiti. An enthusiastic populace turned out in the thousands to welcome him as he toured Port-au-Prince. Stretching halfway out of his car to greet the crowds, Chavez's tour contrasted with that of President George W. Bush.

Bush's presence in five Latin American countries during this same week drew angry demonstrations and required the imposition of near-martial law, the shutdown of cities and states, and a heavily armored, high-speed vehicle to ensure his security (see other article, this edition of NotiCen). Preval announced the creation of a US\$20 million humanitarian fund from the Venezuelan donation that "will be used for equipment and materials, as well as for housing for the Cuban doctors who will come to all the communities of Haiti." To this Chavez added, "We are going to raise the supply quota of petroleum derivatives for Haiti from 7,000 barrels per day to 14,000 bpd." Also in the energy package, four 15-megawatt generator modules will be delivered that will bring power to 2.2 million Haitians in Port-au-Prince, Cap Haitien, and Dessaline St. Mark. Petrocaribe, the ALBA energy component, is scheduled to have them up and running by July 2007, with other equipment deliveries that will boost Haiti's generating capacity by 100 MW.

Haiti and its struggling President Preval are the clear winners in last week's showdown touring battle between Bush and Chavez. It appears from the extensive media coverage of the two tours that Chavez had a much better time of it in Nicaragua, Jamaica, Argentina, Bolivia, and Haiti than Bush had in Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico. But that does not mean that Preval is in any position to take sides in this contest for hemispheric influence. Haitian economist Kesner Pharel says it means Preval must exercise tact in dealing with the Chavez-Bush issue.

Testing Preval's diplomatic skills

Pharel told Haitian Radio Metropole that the country must show gratitude to the Venezuelan president for including it in the ALBA programs, but he stressed, "At the same time we know that the United States is a very important sponsor for Haiti. So the Haitian president will have to show tact in his capacity as head of state to handle these two important personalities. This is a situation where he will have to show his capacity as a diplomat." Pharel called the US a guarantee for Haiti as a longtime partner, "especially since we have the Haitians in the diaspora who send money here." He said.

Haiti is in a difficult position. For instance, the US has included Haiti in the agreement being worked out with Brazil on biofuels at the same time that Venezuela is providing oil, so "Haitian energy diplomacy will have to be carried out on neutral ground." In this instance, Preval will have to be mindful not only of the dueling duo but also of Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, whose contingent plays a very significant role in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, Minustah, and who also must deal with both contenders.

Preval must tread these fine lines while still, with no leverage, pressing the US on one of the same issues upon which other presidents in the hemisphere have had little success with Bush: migration. Haiti's struggle with poverty-rooted violent crime is being worsened by increasing numbers of deportees from the US, many of whom had been arrested, convicted, and served time in US prisons. The US has recently quadrupled the number of deportations, from an average of 25 a month to over 100, adding to the more than 2,000 who have been returned during the last five years. Deportations straining governability The government has been dealing with the influx by jailing the deportees as they arrive, but that policy is putting it at odds with human rights leaders, who say the detentions are illegal and what is needed is policy aimed at integrating the new arrivals in society. Even the US agrees with this view, since the deportees have already served their sentences and are being subjected to double jeopardy.

The US does not seem poised to help beyond having provided a US\$1 million grant to the International Organization for Migration and the Haitian government for a halfway-house program. US Ambassador to Haiti Janet Sanderson said in December that there was a backlog of 450 Haitians in US jails who have served their time but would not be released. They are slated for deportation. The government has taken the position that the returnees contribute to the overwhelming incidence of violent crime in the country, but it does not know whether this is true. "We've been asking the Haitian government for the statistics," said Pierre Esperance, head of the National Human Rights Defense Network, but "no one has the statistics. The Haitian government has created a drama out of the issue of deportees." Many of the deportees are Haitian only by technicality.

The average deportee left the country before the age of eight and was returned 20 years later not even speaking the language. They have little familial, cultural, or emotional connection to Haiti. Once in Haiti, they are marginalized and discriminated against. Said Harry Desire, who was deported 12 years ago, "Everybody, once they know you're a deportee, it's like you're automatically a criminal. So you could be innocent, but if you have a neighbor who doesn't like you, he can call the cops and tell lies, and the cops will believe him. You really have to believe in yourself to survive."

For Preval to survive, he needs all the help he can get, constantly aware of the state of affairs among the helpers.

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