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MINUSTAH Mandate Extended in Haiti, Recognizes Risks of Premature Withdrawal

by Mike Leffert

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UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will recommend that the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH, stay in the country for at least another year. During a first-time visit to the country in early August, Ban credited the mission and its 8,800-member armed force with restoring security and said that President Rene Preval still needs the mission.

Preval has requested the extension. Standing at Preval's side, Ban told reporters, "The international community must not step aside and let spoilers jeopardize Haiti's progress." Preval has backed the force as it has cracked down fiercely on armed gangs, a crackdown that has led to reported dramatic reductions in violence in the slums of Port-au-Prince. Ban noted that the situation was fragile and UN forces had been sent to Haiti five times in the past, so he would ask the Security Council for a 12-month extension of the mandate that expires in October.

Preval called upon citizens not to oppose the continuation of the mission. "The population has benefited from the presence of MINUSTAH," he said. "What is good for the country is for the UN to help us reinforce our police and our security. As time goes on, we'll evaluate what form this assistance should take and how long it should last."

The one-year extension is likely more a waypoint than an endpoint. In July, UN special representative Luis Carlos da Costa said the mission, which already in February was extended to October, should remain for a "minimum of four years," through the "transfer of power from the current government to the next." Da Costa said the armed troops would be needed to see Haiti through an essential reform of the notoriously corrupt justice and prison systems, and it would take at least five years to complete the reinforcement and professionalization of the police force. This has been an ongoing MINUSTAH program, which has trained hundreds of new officers since its inception, apparently with good preliminary results.

In June, MINUSTAH chief Edmund Mulet praised police professionalism on local radio. "As you know, the capacity of the PNH [Police Nationale d'Haiti] is getting better at the professional level," he said. "They are more specialized now in matters regarding criminal and judicial investigation. I also see a determination on the part of the government to face up to this issue." Acknowledging the police progress, however, MINUSTAH still must provide more than 80% of Haiti's security needs while simultaneously training hundreds of recruits for the relatively tiny police force.

There are about 6,000 police to serve a population of 8 million. "We have to be reminded all the time that this is a very fragile state. To rebuild these institutions is going to take time," Mulet has said. Nationalists want a Haitian army. As the mission has been effective in quelling the marauding armed gangs that had put the continued existence of the state in question since the Preval election, it has also engendered a nationalist backlash.

There has been no Haitian army for more than a decade, when President Jean-Bertrand Aristide disbanded it in 1995. Former Maj. Joseph Alexandre, now a lawyer, told the Los Angeles Times, "We should be doing this for ourselves. Each time I have to pass foreign soldiers in our streets, its like a knife stabs me in the heart." Others see an army as a vehicle for the upward mobility of the disadvantaged. "Military service was always a career option for those who wanted to serve their country and a way to better oneself socially and economically," said Francois Rodnez, whose 15-year military career ended with Aristide's abolition.

As dangerous a project as the return to a military might be, there is significant sentiment for it. A citizens' commission was impaneled two years ago to look into the question, and it recently reported that, with more than 1,770 km of coastline and a 391-km border with the Dominican Republic, there is a genuine need for a national armed force. A member of the commission, historian Georges Michel, said an army of 2,000 would be affordable and sufficient to patrol the coasts and borders, maintaining vigilance against weapons and drug smuggling, border incursions, and other threats.

He said the UN mission was wasteful and lacked the incentives for Haitians to protect their homeland. Officials of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have already indicated their availability to train such an army, with a view toward making it less susceptible to the political manipulations that have made the Haitian army a really bad idea in the past (see Chronicle, 1989-04-04, 1991-01-15, 1991-06-04 and 1991-10-01, and NotiSur, 1994-09-02, 1994-09-23 and 1994-12-09). Another commissioner, businessman Maurice Lafortune, said, "We had an army for almost two centuries before one man chose to disband it. It was an institution mistrusted by one man, not by all Haitians."

The idea of a new army appealed to the US-installed interim government of Haiti, which functioned in the timeframe between the toppling of Aristide and the election of Preval. Preval had no stomach for such a proposition and campaigned on the permanent abolition of the military. The president must nevertheless study the matter, because the Constitution still requires an army. The idea of convening a panel of experts is in the discussion stage in the congress, but no one in the ruling party's delegation is in any hurry to get it going.

There are still plenty of people in opposition who remember the bad old days. Said Jocelerme Privert, Aristide's interior minister, "We have to choose between buying tanks and helicopters or building schools and hospitals."

Staying till the job is done

Even if recreating an army were approved, estimates are that it would take about five years to get it up and running effectively. There being little alternative, MINUSTAH can be expected to remain for the duration of this government, until February 2011. Nationalist sentiment aside, the peripatetic nature of international efforts has been more of a problem for the country than has foreign occupation. Ban spoke directly to this point in his Aug. 2 departure speech when he said, "My visit to Haiti just 12 months after that of my predecessor also demonstrates the United Nations' commitment to Haiti, in the face of multiplying challenges elsewhere in the world."

Ban said he had spent his brief time meeting with the Haitian leadership, including "President Preval, Prime Minister [Jacques-Edouard] Alexis, Senate president [Joseph] Lambert, Chamber of deputies president Jean-Jacques [Honorat], Justice Minister [Rene] Magloire, Secretaries of State [Luc] Eucher and Jean [Gerard Dubreuil], as well as representatives of the churches, civil society, the private sector, and the follow-up committee of justice reform. I also visited Cite Soleil and met with Mayor Wilson [Louis] and his two deputies." Ban seemed upbeat and encouraged. "I think it is fair to say that they all recognize that much progress has been made, and that MINUSTAH and the broader UN family are playing a useful role in stabilizing the country.

Democratically elected officials have taken office around the country and security has much improved," he said. "The reduction in violence will allow for progress and development, which could otherwise not have taken place. Today in Cite Soleil, I witnessed how the state has begun to resume its responsibilities." This until recently raging slum is quieter and safer now, since MINUSTAH has pacified it. Mulet noted that the effectiveness of the action owed to Preval's government, which the people accept as their own.

During the US-engineered interim government, the UN was unable to confront the violence effectively because they lacked a mandate with a "legitimate voice." Preval asked the UN to step in only after he opened negotiations with the Cite Soleil gangs and failed to establish peace with them. He gave the mission approval to attack after telling the gangs, "Disarm or die." The secretary-general used fairly clear language to spell out an intended role for the UN that offers something more than a military occupation providing little more than suppression of gang violence with state violence. He was at pains to communicate that, this time around, the international community would behave differently. "I can assure you that I will do everything I can to ensure we do not disengage too early, as has happened in the past."

In the past, the mission might well have declared victory and gone home. There has been an impressive downward trend in nationwide violence, according to UN figures. In January 2006, there were 240 attacks on UN troops, but only 12 in the past four months. Last December, there were 162 kidnappings. In June this year, only six. These numbers did not come about by action benign or benevolent. When the UN went into Cite Soleil in December, they killed a lot of people, mostly supporters of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party.

The area still teems with people who believe that the UN is guilty of politically motivated killing, but, for the first time in a long while, growing numbers support and appreciate the relative peace. What they do not have is work and money. "We're still in misery and hunger over here," said resident Jacques Sonny Simea. "What happened before doesn't happen anymore, but we're still hungry." If the international community is to stay until Simea and his neighbors are not hungry anymore, it will need to change its force from soldiers to police.

French-speaking civilian police are in short supply worldwide, Mulet said, but the government is confident it can turn out enough Haitian police to make a difference. "We don't foresee a return to banditry and criminality in the country. The criminals know that the balance of power has changed," said Alix Fils-Aime, Preval's security advisor. As the troops have been largely successful in their operations, the need for police is becoming more evident.

Soldiers are effective against platoons of heavily armed, politically motivated opponents, but not against civilian criminals. The new violence that is cropping up is that of vigilante justice. Recently people in a rural town beat an accused rapist and murderer to death. "They have lost their fear of the gangs, which has created another problem of lynching," said Mulet.

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