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Former U.S. President Bill Clinton Named U.N. Special Envoy For Haiti

by LADB Staff

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It was not explained how it would help, but there was widespread agreement that naming a Democratic former president of the US, who is also the husband of the US Secretary of State, as special envoy could not hurt Haiti's future prospects. On May 19, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon named ex-President Bill Clinton as UN special envoy to Haiti. Clinton accepted the post and said he was honored to do so. He said in a statement, "Last year's natural disasters took a great toll, but Haiti's government and people have the determination and ability to build back better, not just to repair the damage done, but to lay the foundations for the long-term sustainable development that has eluded them for so long." Secretary of State Hilary Clinton approved the choice, noting that her high-profile, popular spouse would "raise the visibility of the needs of the people of Haiti" and provide added leverage in getting donors to ante up to deal with the extreme need. In mid-April, at the Haiti Donors Conference in Washington, Secretary Clinton said that small investments and assistance from other countries were "beginning to reap dividends in economic growth, wider access to education and health care, stronger governmental institutions, greater safety and security, and a higher quality of life that results when material conditions improve." While conceding that Haiti remained the poorest country in the hemisphere with one of the greatest disparities between rich and poor, she said that in 2007 Haiti had achieved its highest rate of real economic growth since the 1990s and was on track toward the completion point for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative status with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The debt relief Haiti would get from HIPC would free US\$4 million a month for social programming. Another indication of improvement is, Secretary Clinton said, that maternal-death rates have stabilized and numbers of HIV infections and child deaths are coming down. Haiti has the highest rates of these in the hemisphere. Long experience with Haiti Former President Clinton remains a popular figure in Haiti. He has a history of commitment to the country, having used his Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), a project of his William J. Clinton Foundation, on the country's behalf. On the March trip with Ban Ki-moon, they visited two CGI sites formed as a result of his Call to Action on Haiti. One of these was the Haitian Education and Learning Program (HELP). HELP, according to the GCI Web site, www.clintonglobalinitiative.org, seeks to break the poverty cycle by providing merit-based university scholarships to the country's top high school graduates from severely disadvantaged backgrounds. The idea is to bring people from the poorest classes into the professional class. This program was scheduled to double the number of scholarships from 100 to 200 in the next three years and to establish a student center in a historic building. The building is to be refurbished to become the first energy-efficient retrofit in the country as well as to be the first regional HELP expansion. The other site they visited was a collaboration of CGI, Wyclef Jean's Yele Haiti Foundation, the UN's World Food Program (WFP), the Bureau de Nutrition et Developpement, and Les Filles de la Charite de Saint Vincent de Paul. This involves opening 12 new catering kitchens to deliver 14,000 hot meals to Port-au-Prince school children every day and expanding food-aid distribution from 800 to 20,000 families a month in Port-au-Prince, Gonaives, and Cabaret. Clinton has proved his ability to get philanthropic organizations, the private sector, and other concentrations of wealth

to commit and deliver. The CGI 2008 annual meeting secured more than 20 commitments from these sources amounting to US\$130 million, and it is hoped that in his new role he can expand these figures. In particular, the delivery part has to be expanded. Commitments vastly outnumber actual payouts among government and nongovernment organizations when they are solicited to pony up. The former president commented, "So often the people and places ravaged by natural disasters are forgotten only months after they are hit by storms that destroy entire communities and livelihoods." It is not so much that they forget as that they let themselves quietly down off the hook as soon as the spotlight turns elsewhere. But the spotlight does not stray far from Bill Clinton. During the March trip, he and Ban met with Haiti's President Rene Preval and Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis to discuss needs in development, energy, food security, business development, reforestation, and health, and much else that was lost, broken, destroyed, or set back by two hurricanes and two tropical storms in less than a month's time. Pierre-Louis seemed genuinely delighted with bringing on board a man who can steer the largesse of so many, including the US, which pledged US\$57 million at the donors conference. The prime minister told The Miami Herald, "He's going to be extremely helpful because we are really in dire need of support." And they are in dire need of a bill collector with Clinton clout. The donors pledged nearly US\$354 million, but the money has not come, even though, said Pierre-Louis, "they all claimed we had a plan, a good plan. A special envoy could help in making the follow-up with the donors on the conference first and help us go to new donors." The appointment will also be good for the image of the UN in Haiti. The world organization has maintained a massive peacekeeping presence there since 2004. The multinational force under Brazilian control has provided security but has also been severely criticized for its disregard for human rights and as unwanted occupiers. This new face of the UN not only brings in money but is also remembered fondly for ousting a dictatorship in 1994 and effectively using its military to return deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004) to office. Clinton's relationship with the secretary of state will require approval of some of his other international activities and those of his foundation, say reports. Improving prospects Other signs of possible improvement in Haiti's fortunes came from Spain on May 18, where Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez called on the Ibero-American Community of Nations to admit Haiti as a member, in anticipation of Latin American celebrations of the bicentennial of their independence from Spain. Fernandez called the gesture an act of historic reparation because Haiti was a Spanish colony prior to coming under French rule but also an act that would help Haiti enter into "modern global capitalism and take advantage of its opportunities." Fernandez reminded that Haiti was first in the hemisphere to abolish slavery, and the first Latin American nation to declare its independence in 1804, becoming the hemisphere's first black nation. Whatever those opportunities turn out to be in the short term, Haitian workers and labor activists were gratified that, in the aftermath of the Clinton appointment, President Preval raised the minimum wage from 70 to 200 gourdes (US\$5.50/day). The private sector has opposed this move, predicting tens of thousands of job losses. Association des Industries d'Haiti (AIDH) president Georges Sassine said a wage increase like this had already produced disastrous results in Cambodia. Economist Jose Cordero of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) dismissed the prediction of disaster. His view is that the boost for the lowest paid workers will increase consumption, with a likelihood of stimulating local production and increasing employment. Secretary-general of the Confederation des Travailleurs Haitiens (CTH) Paul Chery observed that the old minimum wage, 70 gourdes, was actually lower than it was 25 years ago. In other news that could auger well for Haiti, Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza met with a group of congresspersons on Haiti-related issues. Insulza seems intent on coordinating the

contributions of various agencies with the National Development Plan designed by the Haitian government. He told the legislators that coordination of this kind was what donors at the April conference want to see. He said, "The leaders made a special statement on Haiti that called on OAS members to join forces and asked us to prepare a report on what has been done and to formulate some proposals to continue supporting the efforts of the international community." The OAS is as much a participant as it is a coordinator. Under its own banner and that of its affiliate organization, the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF), the hemispheric organization has worked on a vast civil-registration project that has enabled elections to go forward and citizens to interact with government by providing everyone with proof of identity. That project, begun in 2006, remains about 20% unfinished. PADF is currently working on projects dealing with human trafficking, development, human rights, border development, disaster relief, and natural-resource management. Insulza framed the Clinton appointment as integral to the overall coordination effort. "President Clinton represents, more than anyone else, a certain trend that stresses development. This new trend explores alternatives to make Haiti viable, addressing the real problems of that country." All in all, it has been a good week for Haiti, maybe the best in a long time. Said Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), a sponsor of the OAS briefing, "President Clinton has had a deep and long-standing relationship with Haiti, and this decision is one of the best news we have heard, in terms of the ability to bring the desperately needed resources, focus, and attention the country is needing."

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