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Police Reform and Living Conditions of Displaced Are Concerns Highlighted by UN Security Council Mission to Haiti

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Just over two years after Haiti was hit by a magnitude 7.0 earthquake (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010), a mission of UN Security Council ambassadors visited the impoverished country of 9.7 million people in the French-speaking Caribbean last month.

Various estimates put the quake's toll at more than 200,000 deaths, more than 600,000 displaced, 1.5 million homeless; it devastated the capital Port-au-Prince and other sectors. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has reported that more than 80,000 buildings in the capital and its outskirts collapsed, leaving 10 million cubic meters of debris—equivalent to 4,000 Olympic-size swimming pools, and that some 25,000 cubic meters have been recycled this year to be used for building new infrastructure—this, through a debris-management strategy developed by the Haitian government and the UNDP.

On Feb. 16, closing their four-day visit, the diplomats focused on two key issues: public safety and national security—centering on police reform—and the living conditions of hundreds of thousands still in camps set up for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) who were left homeless and in deeper poverty by the devastating event, in this country where income for 78% of the people is less than US$2 per day.

On the security front, the UN envoys visited the country’s police academy, under the Police Nationale d’Haïti (PNd’H), whose instructors have been trained by UN police serving with the Mission des Nations Unies pour la stabilization en Haïti (MINUSTAH). Established after armed conflict broke out in 2004 in the northwestern coastal city of Gonaives, MINUSTAH’s initial tasks included assisting in the restoration and maintenance of the rule of law, public order, and public safety in the country.

**UN troops and police increased**

Immediately after last year’s quake, the Security Council acted upon the recommendation of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to increase the mission’s overall security-force levels to support immediate recovery, reconstruction, and stability efforts (NotiCen, April 29, 2010). Thus MINUSTAH’s military were increased by 2,000, and police went up by 1,500 officers. The mission has been working closely with the PNd’H for the past several years, training the local force’s staff and assisting in structural-reform efforts.

Besides visiting the police academy, the UN mission’s ambassadors met, in closing their work in Haiti, with the country’s Interior Minister Thierry Mayard-Paul. The Haitian official told the visitors that his department’s top concerns include consolidating democratic governance to fulfill President Michel Martelly’s goal of job creation nationwide. "To carry out the president's vision to create jobs through sustainable economic development and to empower local communities throughout Haiti...
via decentralization, we must consolidate democratic governance," Mayard-Paul told the diplomats, according to media reports.

The minister described safety and national security as "a top concern," adding, "We are convinced that Haiti must assume the tasks of public safety and national security."

The government official said, "This is a long-term task that in our view begins and ends with civilian control of any security force to ensure ongoing disaster preparedness and to heighten the effectiveness of disaster-mitigation efforts." He further explained that, with this goal in mind, Martelly set up a commission mandated to carefully study Haitian armed forces’ rehabilitation and provide recommendations on this issue.

Among other actions, commission members are holding consultations with international experts, including "heads of state and other elected officials and policymakers about this issue," said Mayard-Paul, adding that he has been visiting Caribbean and Latin American nations "to review best practices for public and national safety that have worked in the region".

Leaders have included Presidents Leonel Fernández of the Dominican Republic and Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first woman president, as well as former US President Bill Clinton. "When the commission presents its final report, we believe we will have a long-term roadmap that will enable us to achieve democratic sovereignty," Mayard-Paul forecast.

MINUSTAH head Mariano Fernández said that, although the security situation in Haiti has been showing improvement in the past several years, police reform is urgently needed for peace and stability to be ensured. With 10,106 officers, the PNd'H is insufficient for a country of almost 10 million people, Fernández, who is also the UN secretary-general’s special representative in Haiti, told the Security Council during a briefing at UN headquarters in New York on March 9.

President promises to promote sustainable development
A week after meeting with the UN mission in Port-au-Prince, Mayard-Paul spoke in the US at Florida International University (FIU) where he told its Latin American and Caribbean Center that, in an unprecedented move, the administration of President Michel Martelly is gearing to "close the gap between what people want from democracy and the government's ability to deliver on its promises and bring long-term democratic governance to Haiti," with the aim of "nation building and establishing national sovereignty while overcoming Haiti's development concerns."

In this field, the country's challenges are many and include overcoming historical social vulnerabilities, while foundations are being laid for communities nationwide to achieve long-term, sustainable development, a goal for which "we are developing a plan that will enable us to more effectively deliver state services such as health, sanitation, education, public safety, and disaster preparedness to Haitians across Haiti," said Mayard-Paul. "Most importantly, the world needs to know that the rule of law will be enforced in Haiti. We have taken key actions so that investors can feel confident, since we know that private-sector investments are the engine that will fuel job creation."

During Mayard-Paul's meeting with the UN mission, key issues were the situation of the people displaced by the earthquake and accelerating the reconstruction process. Various estimates indicate that more than 500,000 people remain lodged in makeshift tents and shacks set up in camps for IDP’s.
On the eve of the anniversary of the Jan. 12, 2010, event, thousands of Haitians from across their country peacefully marched in Port-au-Prince, demanding the right to housing, participation in the reconstruction process, and access to land. Once they reached the capital, they marched through Champs de Mars area.

In downtown Port-au-Prince, the Champs de Mars was the city’s main park and the seat of Haiti’s political power, housing the Palais Nationale—home to the country’s executive branch—as well as police and army headquarters, amid monuments to the nation’s heroes and well-groomed gardens. After the earthquake it became the living quarters for some 15,000 homeless, the Palais and both headquarters reduced to rubble, the gardens wiped out.

Addressing hundreds of IDP’s immediately after the demonstration had passed through the Champs, President Martelly told the crowd they were about to go home and assured them that "your president isn’t forgetting you." Referring to reconstruction, he underlined that "this is a kombit," using the Hatian Creole word meaning to make a joint effort to accomplish something.

With French, Creole is one of the country’s two official languages and is largely based on 18th to 21st century French as well as African languages, Arabic, English, Spanish, and West Indian Arawak and Taíno.

Martelly also announced a plan to relocate the displaced in the next two years to rebuilt or repaired homes in their original neighborhoods and assured them the first group would be moved as early as this month.

After just more than two months, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced an immediate disbursement of US$15.1 million under a program for Haiti, bringing IMF funding to US$40.3 million.

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