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Organization of American States Anti-corruption Team to Visit Haiti, Once Ranked Most Corrupt Country

by George Rodriguez

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The Organization of American States (OAS) is sending members of its anti-corruption team on a tour of Caribbean nations, and one of its stops is Haiti. In 2006, the massively impoverished French-speaking island country ranked as the most corrupt of the 163 nations included in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), a yearly study the Berlin-based nongovernmental organization Transparency International (TI) has put out since 1995—two years after it was founded (NotiCen, Nov. 30, 2006).

A commission of the Mechanism for Follow-Up on the implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESICIC—from the Spanish name Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Implementación de la Convención Interamericana contra la Corrupción) is set to visit Haiti on April 8-10.

**Government pushes anti-corruption bill**

Meanwhile, the Haitian government is pressing Congress to complete passage of a bill for corruption prevention and suppression, which the Senate approved in May 2013 but has yet to be voted on by the lower house.

This was the central topic in the meeting Prime Minister Michel Salvador Lamothe held early this month with the head of the lower house Stevenson Jacques Thimoéon.

A communiqué the OAS released on Feb. 3 said a MESICIC commission—made up of representatives of Ecuador and Panama as well as of the Legal Cooperation Department of the organization’s Secretariat for Legal Affairs—"will conduct, from April 8 to 10, an on-site visit to Haiti with the consent of the host country, as part of the follow-up process carried out by the Mechanism in various countries of the region."

The continental organization’s Secretariat for Legal Affairs is MESICIC’s Technical Secretariat.

"Meetings will take place with representatives from oversight bodies responsible for preventing, detecting and punishing corruption, to review the manner in which the Inter-American Convention against Corruption is being implemented in Haiti and to provide firsthand, objective and complete information for consideration in its national report, which will be adopted by the Committee of Experts of the MESICIC in a meeting in September 2014," the communiqué said.

"It is also expected that meetings will take place with Haitian civil society organizations in order to address the topics that are currently being reviewed in the Fourth Round of the Mechanism," the communiqué continued. "In addition, taking into account that Haiti was not party to the MESICIC during its First Round of Review, the on-site visit will also provide an opportunity to address the implementation of topics reviewed in that Round."

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Topics included "conflicts of interest; systems for registering income, assets and liabilities; access to public information; and mechanisms to encourage participation of civil society in efforts to prevent corruption," the OAS communiqué said.

The mechanism began to operate in 2002, and Haiti joined it in 2010, during the Third Meeting of the Conference of the State Parties to the MESICIC. The mechanism is a cooperation structure made up of states, with civil society participation, within the framework of the Inter-American System, and it reviews each country’s legal and institutional structure.

"The incorporation of on-site visits as a stage and integral part of the MESICIC represents an innovative and pioneering initiative of the OAS, which, with the support of the Technical Secretariat, has further strengthened this review process," the communiqué added.

Instituted in 2002 to evaluate the fulfillment of the convention—adopted in 1996—the mechanism’s work group is about to enter a particularly harsh dimension of corruption.

Besides being one the continent’s poorest countries, with some 78% of its 9.7 million people living in extreme poverty and barely surviving on less than US$2 a day, Haiti suffers from endemic corruption.

**Duvaliers leave legacy of corruption**

The first independent nation in Latin America and the Caribbean (1804), as a result of the successful slave revolution that began in 1791, Haiti was ruled for almost three decades by one of the most repressive and corrupt in the long list of dictatorships in the region—that of the Duvalier dynasty.

The régime was started in 1957 by François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957-1971, president for life since 1964). It was continued by his son Jean-Bertrand "Bébé Doc" Duvalier, who at the age of 19 inherited power and exercised it as ruthlessly and corruptly as his father for another fifteen years (1971-1986), until he was toppled by a popular uprising and whisked by the US Air Force to comfortable exile in France as a military junta stepped in.


The Duvalier dictatorship fell, and political instability followed for several years, as well as hurricanes and a devastating earthquake that dramatically deepened and widened poverty, while corruption has remained strong.

This feature has kept Haiti at shamefully high positions in studies such as the CPI, done yearly by TI, as one of the most corrupt countries worldwide, and in 2006 it topped the list of 163 nations. The scale ranges from 100—"very clean" countries—to zero—"highly corrupt."

Five years later it scored 18 and ranked 175 of 182 countries studied; in 2012 its score went up one point and it was in position 165 among 174 nations; and last year it dropped a point, going back to 18 while ranking 167 of 175.

Haiti has also been a regular in another study that analyzes the world’s precarious states, the Failed States Index (FSI), a yearly study done since 2005 by the US think-tank Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy magazine (NotiCen, Feb. 12, 2009).
As the MESICIC team gears up for its mission in Haiti, the country’s government headed by President Michel Martelly is putting pressure on the Chambre des Députés to pass the bill on prevention and suppression of corruption. During the Lamothe-Thimoléon meeting of Feb. 7, the prime minister told the head of the Haitian lower house about the need to get the chamber to put the bill to a vote, according to local media.

The idea is "to give the country a legal framework with deterrent and repressive effects that will help legal and financial institutions repatriate funds and state property misappropriated," according to Lamothe as quoted by the media. He underlined "the urgent need ... to provide the government and state bodies legal means to fight against corruption, tax evasion," and related crimes.

Among other institutions, Lamothe mentioned the Unité de Lutte Contre la Corruption (ULCC), the Unité Centrale de Renseignement Financier (UCREF), and the Dirección Génerale des Impôts (DGI).

The law establishes 17 corruption-related crimes, including bribery, embezzlement, illicit enrichment, influence peddling, misappropriation of funds, money laundering, nepotism, and secret funding of political parties, all punishable with prison sentences from three to fifteen years.

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