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O.A.S. Anti-corruption Mechanism Visits Haiti, Where Corruption Is Deeply Rooted

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With a record as a corruption- and poverty-ridden country, Haiti was visited early this month by the Mecanismo de Segimiento de la Implementación de la Convención Interamericana contra la Corrupción (MESICIC), a work group of the Organization of American States (OAS).

During its April 8-10 stay in this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean island nation—where some 9.7 million of the 10.4 million population live in extreme poverty, 78% with an income below US$2 a day—the MESICIC commission met with government, judicial, and security officials, as well as grassroots, private sector, and professional organizations, academics, and researchers (NotiCen, Feb. 20, 2014).

An OAS communiqué said the work group’s aim was "to obtain objective and complete information and reveal potential difficulties." The visit "also provided an opportunity to ease the exchange of information related to best practices, and provided Haiti the opportunity to benefit from or to request technical assistance," added the OAS.

Commission meetings allowed it "to address issues related to the challenges facing the investigation, prosecution, and punishment of acts of corruption in Haiti; civil society’s views on the role of oversight bodies in Haiti; conflict of interests; sworn statements of assets and liabilities; as well as the participation of the civil society in the fight against corruption in Haiti," the communiqué further reported.

"The results of this visit form part of the review process that is currently being carried out by the Committee of Experts of the MESICIC, and which will conclude with the adoption of the first Haiti report by the Committee at its next plenary meeting to be held in September 2014, in Washington, DC, at OAS Headquarters," the group explained.

Haiti a world leader in corruption

Corruption is usually a sensitive issue in any country, and, whether in Creole or in French, corruption is particularly complex in Haiti, last year’s worst rated nation of the Central American and Caribbean region in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the yearly worldwide report issued by Transparency International (TI).

In the latest CPI, Haiti ranked 163 among 177 countries and territories worldwide, with a score of 26 points, seven below Honduras, the region’s second-worst rated, on a scale ranging from 0 ("highly corrupt") to 100 ("very clean").

In the introduction to last year’s report, TI highlighted that, "while a handful performed well, not one single country gets a perfect score," and added that "more than two-thirds score less than 50," which "paints a worrying picture."
The Haitian government insists that steps have been taken during the past decade to effectively combat corruption, actions that opponents consider cosmetic.

One such step was the creation in 2004 of the Unité de Lutte Contre la Corruption (ULCC), a semi-autonomous body set up to promote construction of a broad-based national strategy of good governance and to combat corruption.

A World Bank (WB) report on a survey it carried out in Haiti in 2005 said that, "recognizing the importance of improving service delivery and greater accountability in Haiti, the government created" the ULCC. "There is widespread consensus and understanding among government and key civil society sectors in Haiti that corruption is a manifestation of multi-faceted, systemic weaknesses that can only be addressed through a broad program of governance, public sector reform and broader accountability throughout Haitian society and government."

"In this context, the Government of Haiti (GOH), in collaboration with the World Bank Institute, decided to organize a national survey on governance and the perception of corruption," the report went on. "The empirical survey will provide the data and analytical information needed to mainstream governance in sectoral reforms and develop a more effective anti-corruption program and strategy. This activity is designed to assist the GOH and others in understanding the nature and causes of corruption in Haiti and help sequence reforms that would help curb corrupt practices and improve the delivery of services to citizens."

The survey was launched in 2005 by then Haitian Provisional President Boniface Alexandre (2004-2006). It was carried out in the capital's Aire Metropolitaine, Cap Haïtien—a port in northern Haiti, one of the cities hardest-hit by the 2010 earthquake—and the eastern Zones Frontaliéres—the areas bordering the Dominican Republic.

Almost 2,600 people were interviewed—mostly household workers (1,072), followed by public employees (906), heads of companies (506), and nongovernmental organization (NGO) members (100)—from August 2005 through May 2006.

In May 2007, the World Bank Institute (WBI) issued the results of its survey, the Enquête diagnostique sur la Gouvernance et la Corruption en Haïti, stating, "We have obtained a clearer picture of how Haitians evaluate governance and its flaws. It is evident that, on several points, there exist fundamental discrepancies between how users evaluate certain public services and institutions, and the assessment public sector employees have of the quality and probity of their own service."

The sectors surveyed "have, in general, revealed equal pessimism," agreeing that "quality of life is bad or very bad. Answers reveal that unemployment, high cost of living and of services such as education and health add to fear regarding security, and public sector corruption are first-line worries," the report added.

In general, survey results "show that corruptions continues to represent a serious challenge in Haiti, and reveal weaknesses in the justice and security sectors, which pose the major obstacles to improving governance, access to quality services, and improving economic growth."

Meanwhile, the government claims commitment to combating corruption, and the opposition says measures taken are really meaningless and amount to nothing more than image building.
Opposition, human rights groups allege threats, harassment

Within this context, opponents to Haitian President Michel Martelly’s administration as well as an international human rights organization have pointed to threats and police arrests of leaders of grassroots watchdog groups against corruption.

In one such case, Amnesty International (AI) reported this month that human rights activist Pierre Espérance, executive director of the Réséau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH) and secretary general of the Fédération Internationale de Ligues des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH), received threats for his work against corruption.

The threats were contained in a letter accusing Espérance of distributing false reports against Martelly aimed at destabilizing his administration, added AI on April 14. The letter also included mention of an attempt against Espérance’s life in 1999 when the activist was hit in a shoulder and a knee by bullets fired at him as he was driving a car. "In 99 we missed you, this time you won't escape it, stop speaking," the letter said, according to the AI account, which added that a judicial police investigation is apparently underway.

The RNDDH has released reports on issues such as the Martelly administration’s alleged ties to drug trafficking as well as the slow progress made regarding the charges of human rights abuses and corruption against former Haitian dictator Jean-Claude "Bébé Doc" Duvalier (1971-1986).

In a telephone statement to the US news agency the Associated Press (AP), Espérance said, "Those who denounce corruption and impunity can be victims at any time."

On April 15, the Observatoire pour la Protection des Défenseurs des Droits de l’Homme, a joint program of the FIDH and the Organization Mondiale contre la Torture (OMCT), reported on the threats made against Espérance.

"According to reports, on April 2, 2014, the RNDDH received a letter with threats and a bullet, addressed to Mr. Pierre Espérance," the observatory stated. "The serious threats followed numerous publications by the RNDDH reporting on Haiti’s regression regarding the struggle against impunity and the struggle against corruption."

"Such threats are within a framework of impunity, more than two months after the murder of Daniel Dorsinvil, a founding member of the Groupe Alternatif de Justice (GAJ) and general coordinator of the Plate-forme des Organisations Haïtiennes des Droits Humains (POHDH), and his wife Girldy Larèche, on Feb. 8, 2014," it further stated. "The Observatoire firmly denounces the threats made against Mr. Pierre Espérance, and calls on Haitian authorities to speedily carry out a prompt, exhaustive, impartial, and transparent investigation aimed at identifying all responsible and to punish them according to the law."

Last year, on Oct. 16, prosecutor Francisco René told local media that businessman Philippe-Victor Chatelin and three customs officials were under arrest for contraband and other corruption charges, thus bringing to nearly 100 the number of persons charged or jailed on such charges during several months.

"We have arrested one important businessman and three Customs functionaries and we are looking for others involved with contraband and corruption. We are determined to fight corruption,
and I want to tell those involved with corruption to give it up, because they will be arrested," the prosecutor said.

Official figures released then showed that at least 90 persons—including government officials—had been arrested or indicted for corruption in a year, up to that date, and other cases were being analyzed by anti-corruption authorities.

"But this is very far from being enough because there are so many other corrupt people who need to face justice, to deter other potential wrongdoers," ULCC director general Antoine Atouriste told reporters, and he called on the lower house of parliament to pass an anti-corruption bill approved by the Senate.

But opposition leader Paul Denis, a justice minister at the time of the 2010 earthquake, said, "This government is marred by corruption at the highest level. Anything they say they do to fight corruption is propaganda."

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