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## **Negotiations for a New Prime Minister in Haiti Fail Again**

by LADB Staff

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In mid-April, the Haitian Senate again rejected President Rene Preval's request that Herve Denis be approved as the country's new prime minister. Intense negotiations between the president and the opposition Organisation Politique Lavalas (OPL) led to Denis' approval in the Chamber of Deputies in early April, but negotiations broke down when the nomination came up for a vote in the Senate. Both the executive and the legislature are under intense pressure to form a new government, since the country has been without a prime minister since June 1997. Hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign loans and donations are frozen pending the formation of another government, and that, in turn, has caused economic stagnation and social unrest (see NotiCen, 01/08/98).

Foreign pressure to resolve the crisis is growing, especially from the US. On April 4, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited the country, her second trip to Haiti in six months. Albright met with President Preval, ex-president Jean Bertrand Aristide, OPL leaders, and representatives from other political parties in parliament to pressure all sides to reach a compromise to approve Preval's latest nominee for prime minister. Preval renominated Herve Denis in late March, even though he had already been rejected by parliament last December (see NotiCen, 04/02/98).

Albright warned all sides that foreign aid would at best only trickle into the country until the current political impasse is resolved. President Bill Clinton's administration has requested that Congress double US assistance to Haiti to US\$140 million this year, but members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have said that such a request has little chance of passage until a new government is formed.

"Frankly, we have been disappointed that Haitian political leaders have taken so long to resolve their differences," said Albright at a news conference during her visit. "The Haitian people deserve a democratic form of government, and they deserve the ability to have the fruits that the international community is trying to give them. It is essential to end the current paralyzing and costly political crisis so that a prime minister can take office and so that international aid can flow more readily."

### ***House approves Herve Denis' nomination***

Given the mounting pressure on both sides, in late March the executive and the legislature reopened negotiations to end the impasse, and in early April it appeared a breakthrough had finally been reached. The opposition OPL, which has a relative majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, has until now refused to support any of the executive's nominees for prime minister unless the president annuls legislative elections held in April 1997. The elections were widely considered fraudulent, and if the results are allowed to stand, the OPL could lose its control in the Senate.

In late March, however, the OPL finally agreed to drop this demand, in part on a commitment by Herve Denis that, if the legislature ratified him as prime minister, he would negotiate electoral

reforms with the opposition. Moreover, during negotiations in late March and early April, Denis also won the support of other opposition parties in parliament. In particular, the "Anti-Neoliberal Bloc" in the legislature threw its support behind Denis because of his moderate economic proposals and willingness to modify the government's state-modernization program.

On April 7, the lower house declared Denis eligible to serve as prime minister in a 41-23 vote, the first time a nominee has won the backing of either legislative chamber since the crisis began last June. To become prime minister, however, Denis still needed approval by the Senate, and even if he received it, he would have to win a vote of confidence by both houses of parliament for his proposed general policies. Negotiations break down in the Senate Despite progress in the lower house, negotiations between the OPL and President Preval broke down when Denis' nomination came up for a vote in the Senate. The OPL had insisted that, before it would approve Denis, President Preval would first have to negotiate most of the economic and political policies of the future government.

Preval, however, countered that such negotiations would have to be handled by Denis when, as nominee, he would present his program to parliament for a vote of confidence. Apparently, the OPL believes that once Denis is deemed eligible, the party will be less able to influence policies, wanting instead to force President Preval to make concessions beforehand. "It is essential that the OPL's vision of power-sharing and governance be taken into account, including our opinions regarding public security, the justice system, police reforms, and economic policy," said OPL head Gerard Pierre-Charles. "The president does not seem to understand that a broad political agreement based on the sharing of power is necessary for the country's stability."

Currently, only 16 of the Senate's 27 representatives are active in their posts. Fourteen Senate votes are needed to approve Denis's nomination, and the OPL controls seven seats. Consequently, on April 16 the Senate rejected Denis' nomination, marking the third time a nominee has been rejected since the crisis began.

After the vote, President Preval accused the opposition of trying to force him to overstep his authority and corral the nominee for prime minister before he even takes office. "The prime minister defines a program that forms his government," said Preval. "I have done my best to hold a dialogue with the political parties, but I cannot take the place of the prime minister and other ministers who are constitutionally responsible before parliament."

And, as the crisis now enters its eleventh month, the president once again appealed to parliament for a compromise. "We must overcome these political problems so that the Haitian people can find the money to build roads, complete projects, and attract investment," said Preval. "I will continue, in the name of the Constitution, to look for a solution to this crisis." [Sources: Associated Press, 04/03-05/98, 04/08/98, 04/09/98; Miami Herald, 04/05/98, 04/06/98, 04/09/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/02/98, 04/03/98, 04/14/98; Notimex, 03/24/98, 03/25/98, 04/14-16/98; Inter Press Service, 04/16/98; Reuter, 04/17/98; Agence France- Presse, 04/14/98, 04/18/98]

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