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NEWS STORY

Haiti Election Observers Chosen, But Will There Be An Election?

Canada is preparing to send 130 experts to observe the elections in Haiti, slated for Jan. 8, but critics worry that Haiti is not ready, and the vote will be delayed once again.

By Christina Leadlay

The Canadian development agency is expected to announce this week the names of 130 Canadians selected to be election observers in Haiti, but critics wonder whether the election will go forward next month as planned.

Presidential elections in Haiti have been delayed over five times since the democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was removed from office in February 2004. The interim government has blamed election delays on technical problems.

Carlo Dade, Senior Advisor at the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), says that it's impossible to tell if Haiti is ready for these elections. "Up to recently, a lot of the delays in the elections could be traced to simple incompetence at the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP)," explains Mr. Dade. He says there is widespread disrespect of the council in charge of compiling a list of candidates, setting up polling stations and distributing national identity cards.

"They missed deadlines, they had no sense of urgency about the elections, they were overly concerned with making sure that the elections had a Haitian stamp on them, as opposed to the OAS (Organization of American States) or the UN which were providing technical assistance," he says.

"We really don't know [if Haiti is ready for elections]. It's pretty much impossible to tell," says Mr. Dade, who has served for five years in the country with the U.S. government.

The most recent date set for Haitians to cast their ballots is Jan. 8, 2006. CANADEM, a non-profit agency dedicated to democracy and human rights, and Canada Corps, a program of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), are managing the Canadian contingent of observers. The group is expected to leave no later than Jan. 3 and return Jan. 11, according to Neil Burron, Director of Elections at CANADEM.

CIDA spokesperson Eleonora Karabatic confirms that the list has not yet been finalized.

Of the Canadian government's \$29.5 million commitment toward the electoral process in Haiti, "\$2 million will go to Canada Corps to fund the deployment of up to 300 Canadian short-term observers (up to 150 observers for each round). Another \$2 million will be provided to Elections Canada to oversee the short-term observers on the ground," says Ms. Karabatic.

The Haiti mission is relatively large in number, but last December's 469-strong team sent to Ukraine to observe the repeat presidential ballot has been Canada's largest deployment.

"I suppose the country dynamics are different than some other countries in the sense that Haiti is a bit unstable," says Mr. Burron, "but in terms of the criteria that we're looking for, it's very similar to any other observation mission. We're always looking for people with elections experience and country experience."

Volunteers must meet basic requirements such as holding a valid Canadian passport, agreeing to remain neutral and enjoying good health. Each deployment also has a unique list of 'preferred criteria,' that ranges from previous election experience in a post-conflict environment, to proficiency in French or Creole, Haiti's two main languages.

While Canadians of Haitian background are considered, Mr. Burron notes that applicants are carefully screened to ensure neutrality. "We consider Haitian-Canadians, but they are not given preference and we do have to be careful about making sure there are no [political] affiliations," he says.

Mr. Dade says that CANADEM has learned to recruit from beyond the cultural diaspora, which he says they relied too heavily upon for volunteers during last year's mission to Ukraine. "They've learned from mistakes in the Ukraine observation mission, so they are looking for Canadian professionals that have served abroad to go down as opposed to going heavily after the diaspora," says Mr. Dade.

CANADEM has a roster of 7,000 experts it's able to draw from for these types of missions, explains Mr. Burron. "It's a roster of Canadian experts in different areas of international affairs, such as human rights, democratization, elections, peacebuilding, police security --a whole gamut of international activities," he says. Registrants come from a variety of backgrounds, some academic, but mostly with practical experiences such as lawyers, engineers, politicians and those with UN or international organization expertise. "It's open to any Canadian," says Mr. Burron.

"There is a lot of concern about the election being postponed," concedes Mr. Burron, who will be in Haiti for one month coordinating the mission on the ground. "A lot of people are saying that January isn't a realistic date, so there are some expectations that it might be further postponed. It has been postponed several times already. Originally it was supposed to be in November," he says. Mr. Burron explains that the elections are indeed delayed, then the observer team has to completely reorganize itself.

"We [will] just have to go back to the drawing board and start the logistical process over again," says Mr. Burron, noting that everything from the CIDA-organized briefing session to airline tickets to official government accreditation will have to be redone in the event that the team does not head to Haiti on Jan. 3.

Both Mr. Burron and Ms. Karabatic point out that Elections Canada is working as part of the steering committee of the International Monitoring Mission to the Haitian Elections (IMMHE), which includes representatives from Chile, Panama, Brazil, Mexico and the United States. Of these countries, Canada is sending the most observers, though a contingent of 20 is expected from the CARICOM group of countries, as is an American team, says Mr. Burron.

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