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Doors Closed On Haiti Session

By Christina Leadlay

The Canadian government is restricting its June 16-17 international conference on Haiti to senior officials from countries involved with reconstruction in the Caribbean nation, keeping the media and other interested parties out. Fulfilling a promise he made in March 2005 at the Cayenne meeting in French Guyana, Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew, together with International Cooperation Minister Aileen Carroll, is hosting this closed conference of working sessions in Montreal this week with the aim of reviewing the current situation in Haiti, and preparing for elections currently slated for October.

In attendance will be a delegation from Haiti's interim government, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Hérard Abraham and Juan Gabriel Valdés, Head of the United Nations Mission to Haiti (MINUSTAH), who will "provide a full report of his own perspective of the situation," says Denis Coderre, the prime minister's special advisor for Haiti. Mr. Coderre will be on hand in Montreal along with Mr. Pettigrew, Ms. Carroll, and "most of the directors, people regarding security, cooperation, francophonie, all the stakeholders in Foreign Affairs, PMO, [and] PCO," he says. Also expected at the table are senior U.S. officials and their counterparts from France, Spain, Canada, and Brazil. "We are sending the Undersecretary General for Cooperation from the Brazilian foreign ministry, and I will go as future ambassador to Haiti," explains Paulo Cordeiro, Minister Counsellor at the Embassy of Brazil in Ottawa, who is due to start his new role as Brazil's ambassador to Haiti next month. "The Argentineans are sending also the Undersecretary for Latin America and the future ambassador of Argentina to Haiti, it's a professor from Buenos Aires, and what's new is that Japan and Germany are invited. They have embassies in Port-au-Prince, they have programs of cooperation," says Mr. Cordeiro. The UN, World Bank and IMF and OAS are also expected to attend the Montreal-based conference, set to take place at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel.

Foreign Affairs spokesperson Cloé Rodrigue explains that the event is not open because, "It's more of a high officials meeting, it's not open to the public or to the media, but there will be media events [...] It's a work session, so they will be able to work without the pressure of how they will appear in front of the media," she explains. The decision to close the conference is seen as a positive step by some. "Basically if you have an open meeting then people take very defensive positions," says Eduardo Del Buey, Executive Director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL). "If you have a closed meeting then people are more prone to being open and engaging in a much more active

dialogue knowing that their every word is not being held up to public scrutiny, so that helps them develop a negotiating position that allows them to be much more strategic." But others, like activist Jean Saint-Vil, a founding member of the Ottawa Haiti Solidarity Committee and the Canada Haiti Action Network, see the decision to close the conference as a response to events at the Dec. 2004 conference on the Haitian Diaspora. "[At the] last conference, the one in December, they had some journalists there who happened to ask some very embarrassing questions and I heard that there was one of them who was actually expelled [...] he asked some direct questions of Paul Martin at the end of the conference, and then someone started saying 'Who is this guy working for?' and they said there was some problems with press accreditation, and they escorted him out," says Mr. Saint-Vil. "What I know is that a demonstration is going to be organized in Montreal at the time of this conference."

Following the July 19, 2004 meeting in Washington, D.C. and the follow-up meeting in Cayenne, French Guyana earlier this year, the Montreal conference is part of a series of meetings which the countries involved in Haiti's reconstruction "meet not only to talk about security and electoral process," says Mr. Coderre, "it's also a discussion about our definition of red tape, like we don't want it," he laughs. "It's really a meeting of the donor countries, so this is important also to see the follow-up on specific criteria, to see the evolution of the situation," he says. Topics up for discussion and review in Montreal include the UN's mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) whose mandate expires on June 24 the implementation of the Interim Cooperation Framework (ICF), and the upcoming elections set to take place in October and November 2005.

Mr. Coderre returned on June 11 from a three day pre-conference research mission to Haiti, along with France's special envoy Daniel Parfait, U.S. State department representative Roger Noriega, and Brazil's special envoy to Haiti, Gonçal Murao. The trio met with Haitian interim President Boniface Alexandre, Prime Minister Gerard Latortue, his finance and foreign ministers, as well as representatives from civil society groups, the Haitian business community, the electoral council, and former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Prime Minister Yvon Neptune, who is in prison, in an attempt get different views on the situation in Haiti: "the facts in their own perspective," says Mr. Coderre.

As special advisor on Haiti, Mr. Coderre is keen to see this meeting in Montreal succeed in bringing sound changes and advancements in the lives of Haitian citizens. "I don't want to see just a report from this conference," he states. "It is important to see some ongoing commitments, and address some issues and questions, and provide the answers from an international community perspective, but also from all of the stakeholders, namely the government of Mr. Latortue, the United Nations, Caricom, also the OAS, La Francophonie, all the stakeholders that truly have a role to play," says Mr. Coderre, noting that if asked, he will recommend that donor countries focus on the restoration of electricity and energy, strengthening education and schooling, and a strategic urban plan aimed at improving security in Port-au-Prince's Cité Soleil neighbourhood, in order to advance the reconstruction in Haiti. "We can't expand and talk about everything, but we need to be also focussed on certain elements, and I really believe that these are some of the key issues, and I know the government of Latortue, they want to talk about energy and schools and those issues. That will be a good way for the Montreal conference, and at the same time it's a follow-up of Cayenne [...] I think we should put some pressure and

these are kind of issues that help us really get concrete results," he says. However, activists like Jean Saint-Vil fear that the Montreal meetings will only hide what he feels is Canada's true role in Haiti: "This conference, to me, is only there as a smoke screen. It's just really for public consumption. People hear that we are helping and honestly, I don't refrain from saying it anymore, it's the same arrogant white man's burden ideology," he says. "That's what the prime minister is pushing, when in reality what he should be pushing for is a new type of collaboration with Haiti where you have an elected government that has normal relationships. We don't have a normal relationship anymore. What we have here is Mr. Coderre going to Haiti and giving orders to puppets, unelected people. It's a colonial relationship," says Mr. Saint-Vil.

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