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Haiti's New President Quietly Makes the Rounds

Without fanfare, Haitian president-elect René Préval slips into Ottawa. Meeting with the PM, he asks Canada to stay the course and tells the diaspora they can count on dual citizenship.

By Sarah McGregor

With little publicity, Haitian president-elect René Préval arrived in Ottawa this week for a series of private meetings with Canadian officials, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper, to get relations off to a good start with one of the Caribbean nation's largest aid donors.

An evening reception at the Lac-Leamy Hotel in Gatineau kicked off the visit on Sunday attended by most heads of mission from the Caribbean and Latin American diplomatic corps, federal bureaucrats, business leaders and members of the Haitian diaspora, where Mr. Préval was warmly embraced --quite literally with hugs and gentle arm squeezes.

After being greeted and working his way through the throng of several hundred invited guests, Préval addressed the crowd, earning applause for his pledge to build bridges to Haitians living abroad and recognize them as dual citizens. "Haitians who are here in the country for economic or other reasons need to be recognized as Haitians abroad," says Mr. Préval, in French.

Nandy Jacques, a nurse at the Gatineau Hospital, CHVO, has roots in Haiti, and approached Mr. Préval at the event to ask for a constitutional change so that Haitians living abroad are no longer denied the right to vote in elections. "He gets the message," says Mr. Jacques.

Remittances -- money sent home from Haitians living elsewhere -- climbed to \$650 million (US) in 2002, and accounts for 19 per cent of the country's total gross domestic product, according to the World Bank. An estimated 2 million Haitians live off the island, including about 50,000 in Canada, mostly based in Montreal, Quebec. Mr. Jacques says the government cannot ignore this powerful force. "He's my president, and so working with us on Haiti is a good idea," he says.

In an unscripted speech, Mr. Préval says that Haiti will depend on overseas aid in its bid to create positive conditions for investment and social programs. Internal unrest, political instability and faltering international support have stymied development in Haiti for decades.

The immediate priority is to restore security, he says. "We know the conditions are difficult in Haiti," he says. High on his agenda is a strong judicial system that will promote respect for the law and punish those who break the rules, he says.

Mr. Préval was named as the democratically elected president earlier this year, but his inauguration was postponed to May 14 so the ceremony would include parliamentarians, elected in a run-off vote in late April. Former president Jean Bernard Aristide was forced from office in 2004, and an interim government has run the country since.

In an endeavor to bring good fortunes to the country, Mr. Préval called for the participation of business groups, civil society, religious groups and foreign donors to make big gains.

Mr. Harper has promised to stay the course in Haiti. International Cooperation Minister Josée Verner and Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay announced in a news release this week an additional \$48 million in aid to support democracy building in Haiti, including \$18 million for debt relief. Haiti, the poorest country of the Americas, is the largest recipient of Canadian assistance in the region. Canada has spent \$190 million over the past two years.

NDP Foreign Affairs Critic Alexa McDonough says that Mr. Préval must be given a free hand to drive democratic reform. The Canadian MP returned last month from a whirlwind five-day parliamentary mission to Haiti -- her first visit to the country -- to see close-up the state of affairs. "People don't want to look back, they want to look forward," says Ms. McDonough, when asked what struck her the most.

On the issue of Haiti, Ms. McDonough says political parties in Canada should be able to settle their differences and do what's best for the Caribbean nation. "It's a matter of asking 'What can we help you with?'" she says, noting that question must be posed not only to Mr. Préval, but to the entire population of 8.3 million in the French-speaking nation.

Peter Goldring, a Conservative MP, was also part of the delegation and a first-time visitor to the country. "It's an absolute tragedy," he says of the struggle for many Haitians to survive and the crumbling infrastructure. "I think our prime minister has indicated positively an interest to be part of the solution to rebuild the country... within the president of Haiti's wishes and within his expectation."

John Graham, chair of the board of directors at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) in Ottawa, says the invitation of Mr. Préval to Canada's capital is a good sign that the new Conservative government will keep Haiti "as a priority."

The four-day trip included a stop in Montreal yesterday and will wrap up today in Quebec City.

On a related note, reports early this week quoted Haitian officials -- including former cabinet ministers under Mr. Aristide and a former prime minister and now top adviser to Mr. Préval-- as saying they have been barred entry to Canada over claims they committed crimes against humanity, even though they've never been charged. Interim prime minister Gérard Latortue, in Ottawa earlier this year, asked the government to lift travel restrictions on political supporters of former regimes. "Help us, forget about that... give a chance to all Haitians now to be able to reconcile once again and be able to work together," he says.

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