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NEWS STORY

Haitian Senators Get Little Help in Planning Study Tour

A multi-party group of senior senators want to make more links between Canada and Haiti, and call for decentralizing the development aid to their country.

By Lee Berthiaume

A visiting group of senior Haitian senators has raised concerns that Canada is only engaging the Caribbean nation's executive branch, and is asking that development efforts be decentralized.

In addition, some expressed disappointment that Canadian authorities did not properly support their visit to Canada, part of a larger trip to meet with and learn from parliaments in other countries.

"If you say you have invested into governance and parliament, this is part of the learning process," said Haitian Senate vice-president Edmonde Supplice Beauzile in an interview yesterday. "So why not support this also?"

While Canada's mission to Afghanistan continues to grab headlines and vitriolic parliamentary debate, Haiti has quietly emerged as not only the second-largest recipient of Canadian aid, but an important part of the government's Americas strategy.

Last year Canada pledged \$520 million over five years to the Caribbean nation, and has deployed numerous personnel to work there as part of the United Nations' mission to Haiti. In addition, Haiti has served as a point of convergence between Canada and other Latin American countries. Yet the delegation, comprised of six senators from four political parties, was forced to secure their own visas and did not receive any Canadian government assistance in paying for their trip to Canada.

"We had no support," said Sen. Rudolph Boulos. The senators said they did ask for support, but it was not clear why they were turned down.

"Sometimes they do not want to support what we want them to support," added Sen. Jean

Hector Anacassis, president of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation.

The visit to Canada, facilitated by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), was part of a tour that included a stop in Washington, D.C., where they met with senior officials in the American government, the Organization of American States and the International Monetary Fund. They are now off to Mexico and will also visit a number of Latin American countries.

MPs More Powerful than Executive

While in Ottawa, the senators met with Bloc Québécois and Liberal MPs, as well as Conservative MP Rahim Jaffer and Foreign Affairs Secretary of State Helena Guergis. They also had a brief meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier. Mr. Boulos said the purpose of the trip was to create connections between Haitian and Canadian parliamentarians because, he felt, there have been a limited number of contacts at the legislative level. "It is essential because if you don't have more people, more links, than all the information gathers with the ambassador," he added.

There are 33 political parties represented within the Haitian legislature, and so there has been difficulty in ensuring when there is information available on projects or other issues, that it gets to all parties.

"Government is much more than just the executive branch," Mr. Boulos said. "In our constitution today, parliament has much more power than the executive branch."

The senators also raised concerns about some aspects of Canadian aid. Ms. Beaulize said last year, the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, which works with parliamentarians in developing countries, initiated a project in conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"As of now there has been no contribution that can be seen because there was no discussion at the beginning on how the project was designed," she said.

While a number of training symposiums and sessions have been held, "we have no physical place to work," Ms. Beaulize added.

The senators did say that Canadian aid has been effective in other areas, though they would like to see it decentralized and used in the rural areas, specifically in agricultural development.

"Good government can only be achieved when you have good action on the ground," Ms. Beaulize said.

"As much as possible, when it is done at the community level, it helps," Mr. Boulos added.

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