

Helping Haiti back to its feet

Though the country still faces huge problems, efforts to stabilize and rebuild are yielding signs of progress

MARCUS GEE

July 20, 2007 at 11:16 AM EDT

Prime Minister Stephen Harper arrives in Haiti at a time of modest hope for the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere -- and Canada can claim part of the credit.

Haiti's turbulent political scene has been unusually stable since René Prével, a soft-spoken agronomist, was elected President in February of 2006. The gangs that used to terrorize the squalid slums of the capital, Port-au-Prince, have pulled in their claws after UN peacekeeping forces took them on this year.

The country's prostrate economy has begun to show twitches of life, with falling inflation and a rising currency.

Though Haiti still faces huge problems, from a ruined environment to a jobless rate near 70 per cent, it is a definite improvement from the time just three years ago when there were almost daily clashes among armed gangs, rogue policemen and UN peacekeepers.



"Things have not been this good in Haiti in a long time," said Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas. "The perception that it is a basket case just doesn't jibe with what's going on on the ground."

Canada has been one of the leaders of the international effort to stabilize and rebuild Haiti, which was reduced to beggary by dictators, generals and drug lords.

Ottawa has sent more than \$700-million in aid since 1968 and has pledged another \$520-million for 2006 to 2011.

Though Haiti's population of 8.7 million makes it a minnow in a Latin American sea of 561 million people, it gets more Canadian aid than any other country in the region. In fact, it gets more than any country in the world except Afghanistan.

More than 500 Canadian troops served in the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti until coming home in August, 2004. Canadian officers led the UN police force, which still includes about 175 Canadian police officers, for two successive terms. A third of the election observers who monitored last year's election were Canadian.

To symbolize its commitment to Haiti, Ottawa sent Governor-General Michaëlle Jean, whose family fled tyranny in Haiti for freedom in Canada, to Mr. Préval's inauguration in May, 2006.

Has all this help made any difference? Even the strongest supporters of international intervention in Haiti allow that progress is sometimes hard to see. Half of Haitians live on less than \$1 (U.S.) a day and three-quarters on less than \$2. Haiti is 154th out of 177

countries on the UN's index of human development, the only non-African country in the bottom 30.

The average Haitian can expect to live just 57 years and per capita gross domestic product is only \$500 (Canadian). Canada's per capita GDP, at \$44,000, is 88 times larger.

"Haiti is a tough case," conceded Daniel Erikson, Latin America analyst at the group Inter-American Dialogue in Washington. "This is a country that has received millions and millions of dollars in aid and hasn't shown much progress."

On the other hand, he said, it would be folly for the international community to give up on Haiti now, just as it seems to be getting back on its feet.

HAITI DEMOGRAPHICS

Population: 8,706,497

Median age: 18.4 years

Population growth rate: 2.5 per cent

Birth rate: 35.87 births/1,000 population

Infant mortality rate: 63.83 deaths/1,000 live births

Life expectancy at birth: 57.03 years

HIV-AIDS adult prevalence rate: 5.6 per cent

Literacy (percentage of those 15 and over who can read and write): 52.9 per cent

GDP real growth rate: 2.5 per cent (2006 est.)

Unemployment rate: widespread unemployment and underemployment; more than two-thirds of the labour force do not have formal jobs (2002 est.)

Population below poverty line: 80 per cent (2003 est.)

Inflation rate: 14.4 per cent (2006 est.)

The International Crisis Group, headquartered in Brussels, said in a report released on Wednesday that while the Haitian state remains "very weak," Haiti "has an historic opportunity to design a democratic future and establish conditions conducive to economic development." Already there are signs of tentative progress.

The economy grew by 2 per cent last year and is expected to grow 3.5 per cent this year. The inflation that was eroding Haitians' meagre earnings has fallen from 46 per cent in 2004 to about 8 per cent at present.

On the political side, the result of the 2006 presidential election, considered the most fair of five held in the past two decades, has been generally accepted, even if supporters of ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide still hold rallies calling for his return from exile.

Security has improved too, at least in part because of the efforts of Canadian police and peacekeepers.

"We did get Haiti settled down in terms of peace and security," said RCMP Chief Superintendent Graham Muir, who headed the UN policing operation until last year. "It gets progressively better as months go by."

He said that with all that is left to accomplish, including the "Job 1" task of reforming the often corrupt and badly run Haitian police, it would be regrettable for Canada suddenly "to wrap it up and get out."

Haiti could easily tip into turmoil again. The country suffered three decades of terror and repression under François (Papa Doc) Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude, known as Baby Doc, who ruled with the help of the dreaded Tonton Macoutes secret police.

Elizabeth Abbott, a Canadian writer and journalist who lived in Haiti in the 1980s and has written a book about the Duvaliers, admits she sometimes feels despairing about Haiti.

"But you have eight million people there and you can't just say the situation is hopeless and we've done the best we can," she said. "Maybe we have a moral obligation, having started in, to get it right."

Canadian aid projects

Haiti gets more Canadian aid than any other country in the world except Afghanistan. Canada has pledged \$520-million for 2006-2011. The Canadian International Development Agency has \$353-million worth of projects under way in Haiti, including:

- \$24.75-million over three years to support transparent election processes
- \$19.8-million for road transport and water sanitation
- \$19.06-million over six years to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS
- \$18.99-million over eight years for power generation
- \$16-million for debt relief
- \$12-million over eight years for primary education and basic health care
- \$10-million over four years for justice programs, peace-building, and democracy and peace support
- \$9.36-million over three years for an election observer mission
- \$8.2-million over six years to fight maternal mortality
- \$5-million over six-years for justice and human rights
- \$5-million over five years to support and strengthen the Haitian parliament
- \$5-million over four years to support the Ministry of Justice
- \$4-million over seven years to improve women's rights
- \$2.08-million over three years for local media and information flow
- \$2-million over seven years as part of the Latin American project to combat hunger
- \$64,000 over six years for youth sport

Tenille Bonoguore

Haiti demographics

Population: 8,706,497

Median age: 18.4 years

Population growth rate: 2.5 per cent

Birth rate: 35.87 births/1,000 population

Infant mortality rate: 63.83 deaths/1,000 live births

Life expectancy at birth: 57.03 years

HIV-AIDS adult prevalence rate: 5.6 per cent

Literacy (percentage of those 15 and over who can read and write): 52.9 per cent

GDP real growth rate: 2.5 per cent (2006 est.)

Unemployment rate: widespread unemployment and underemployment; more than two-thirds of the labour force do not have formal jobs (2002 est.)

Population below poverty line: 80 per cent (2003 est.)

Inflation rate: 14.4 per cent (2006 est.)