

Feds nix appointing special envoy

But Haiti effort needs it, says agency

By STEPHEN MAHER Ottawa Bureau

OTTAWA — The Conservative government closed the door Friday on the idea of appointing a former prime minister as a special envoy to help lead Canada's development efforts in Haiti.

"No, it is a government of Canada initiative of the prime minister of Canada, supported by (Foreign Affairs) Minister (Lawrence) Cannon and (Development) Minister Bev Oda," said Catherine Loubier, spokeswoman for Cannon, on Friday afternoon.

The idea of a special envoy was proposed by Carlo Dade, the executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, who argues that Canada's long-term aid commitment to Haiti is on such a large scale that it would benefit from a high-profile emissary who could rally Canadians inside and outside government to the cause.

"It's going to require more from us than anything we've done before," he said.

Helping Haiti recover from the Jan. 12 earthquake will require a massive international effort. The Inter-American Development Bank has estimated that it will take 10 years and about US\$14 billion.

The government of Stephen Harper has won praise for Canada's initial efforts, sending ships and soldiers to provide security, set up clinics and provide clean water, and Harper has pledged to help Haiti for a decade. Canadians have raised more than \$150 million for Haiti, a sum the government will match.

This unprecedented effort in Haiti in the years to come requires a new approach, said Dade.

"It can't be just the government," he said. "It's going to have to be a whole-of-Canada proposition. It's going to need the private sector to step up and volunteer people in the longer term. Canadian towns and cities across the country are going to have to be brought into the process."

Dade pointed out that in the United States, former presidents Bill Clinton and George W.

Bush have played a leading role in spearheading Haitian aid.

Having a former prime minister — Joe Clark, Brian Mulroney, Paul Martin or Jean Chretien — do the same thing in Canada would take the pressure off Harper, who cannot focus on Haiti all the time.

"You'd have someone at the highest level who can keep attention on the situation and who has the political muscle to keep public attention in the media," said Dade. "Harper can do the short-term stuff but this is a marathon, not a sprint."

Not everyone in the aid community thinks that appointing a special envoy would be a good idea.

"I'm not certain that it's a bad idea, but my first instinct isn't to assume it's a good idea," said Robert Fox, executive director of Oxfam Canada.

"Our interest is in ensuring that Haitians are at the centre of the development process."

The role of development agencies is to support a process led by the Haitian government and Haitian diaspora community, said Fox.

But nobody should underestimate the impact former leaders can have, says Arthur Milnes, an expert on Canada's former prime ministers at Queen's University Centre for the Study of Democracy.

"I think that unfortunately, unlike America, we have a terrible lack of tradition of turning to past leaders," he said. "And this is exactly the situation where it could help."

Milnes, who worked as a researcher on Mulroney's memoirs, pointed out that Mulroney received Haiti's highest honour for his work helping the country.

Haiti was a "big priority" for Chretien, he said. Clark is widely recognized as the best Canadian foreign minister since Lester Pearson, he said, and Martin is respected for his development work.

"You've got these guys with Rolodexes that no other Canadians can aspire to," he said. "And most importantly, they're basically non-partisan Rolodexes. So why wouldn't sitting Canadian prime ministers use them? It makes no sense to me. At all."

Harper's government has been criticized by the opposition and commentators for failing to appoint a high-level special envoy to Afghanistan.

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