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NEWS STORY

Haitian Riots, Unrest 'Major Setback' to Image

A planned trip to Canada by Haitian businessmen was cancelled last week after riots led to violence, while the potential damage to the Caribbean nation's image could have long-term effects.

By Lee Berthiaume

With a 65 per cent unemployment rate, job creation is considered essential to helping Haiti pull itself out of a vicious circle of poverty and instability.

With that in mind, a group of Haitian businessmen had been scheduled to visit Canada last week to drum up interest in the Caribbean nation. That, however, was before their businesses and homes were attacked during a bout of unrest that experts say was driven by rising food prices, political posturing and corruption.

Not only was the trip cancelled because the company representatives were forced to stay home to protect their livelihoods and families, but experts fear Haiti has taken a blow in its ability to attract new business as old fears of instability, violence and corruption are reborn.

"This is a major setback," said Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) who has been working to attract business to Haiti. "The looting and the burning is one thing, but it's the perception."

Haiti is the largest recipient of Canadian aid—more than \$500 million over five years to 2011—after Afghanistan. While the latter continues to capture headlines because of Canada's military involvement there, experts and government officials have cited significant progress as the reason Haiti doesn't appear in the news more.

For his part, Mr. Dade had been working hard to set the record straight on the true crime rate in Haiti, repeatedly saying that Jamaica has a higher murder rate and that the situation in Haiti has improved dramatically, especially following last year's crackdown on gang leaders and organized crime figures.

"People were starting to think 'Well maybe it makes sense, maybe there are

opportunities," he said.

However, that was before protests over sharply increasing food prices broke out last month, leading to riots that have left six dead, a UN base in shambles, and the Haitian government in disarray, with prime minister Jacques Edouard Alexis, a close ally of President René Préval, ousted from office.

Mr. Dade said the food crisis was only the "spark" that ignited the current raging inferno in Haiti, and that the political situation there has been ripe for upheaval due to the political situation, which involves the president's office, parliament and other players.

"There's enough blame to go around on both sides here," he said, though parliamentarians were singled out for particularly harsh criticism. "The parliament is troubling."

Mr. Dade said that for people like him, who are trying to help Haiti throw off its basket case image, the country's parliamentarians have done nothing to assist.

"It's almost like the country is trying to shoot itself in the foot," he said. "You just don't want to be involved in a place that looks unstable."

Mr. Dade was hopeful the private sector would look at the recent unrest as "growing pains" on Haiti's road to success, but said unless jobs are created in the Caribbean country, "we are simply wasting our time."

While the private sector being scared off for the long-term is worrying enough, Mr. Dade said there are also concerns Latin American countries like Chile, Argentina and Brazil, all of which have played large roles in helping bring development and security to Haiti, may decide the job is too tough. The Haitian Embassy did not respond to interview requests this past week.

Brazilian Ambassador Paulo Cordeiro de Andrade Pinto said President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva remains committed to Haiti. While Brazil could "theoretically" draw down from its current commitment of 1,100 peacekeepers and 150 engineers due to progress on the ground, he said.

However, he was adamant that a year from now, Brazil will still have peacekeepers patrolling the Caribbean country, and perhaps as many as 250 engineers.

"We know, now that we are there, that leaving will be irresponsible," Mr. de Andrade said in an interview on Monday, though he acknowledged that when Mr. Lula leaves in 2011, "we cannot say what will happen."

Prior to arriving in Canada last month, Mr. de Andrade served for three years as Brazil's ambassador in Haiti. He agreed that the recent unrest will scare off potential investors and traders, adding that economic development is essential if the country is to improve, though that hasn't happened.

"The life of the Haitian person has not changed much," he said.

Mr. de Andrade was also of the belief that a large part of the problems raging in Haiti right now stem from major problems in the country's parliament, as well as ongoing issues involving drug running and other organized criminal activities.

To that end, Mr. de Andrade said he had been expecting, to some degree, unrest in Haiti, which he felt wasn't necessarily a bad thing because people were starting to think of the ongoing political and criminal problems as "normal."

Bloc Québécois Foreign Affairs critic Vivian Barbot, who was born in Haiti, said the situation in the country isn't improving fast enough for the people there, and called on the Conservatives to do more, including better use of Canadian aid.

"They [people on the ground] tell me they can't even find a trace of that money to tell me exactly how much has been going on," she said. "We know it's happening in other countries, but in Haiti it is even worse because the [Haitian] government doesn't have money to pay the people."

Ms. Barbot worried other countries will "get bored" of continuing to help Haiti, a country that can't seem to get on its feet, "but we can't allow that because it happens on our doorsteps."

She said she has been devastated and frustrated by the events in Haiti. "People keep saying it can't be worse, but it can be worse every time."

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