

Some see quagmire for Brazil troops in Haiti

By Angus MacSwan

SAO PAULO, Brazil, Jan 20 (Reuters) - It all started so optimistically for Brazil's peacekeeping mission in Haiti.

Back in June, a grateful population welcomed the troops. Brazil's soccer superstars showed up to play a special "peace game" and President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva visited the blighted Caribbean country to spread his brand of good cheer.

The mission would show that Brazil was ready to assume a role as a regional diplomatic power with a more socially aware approach than the heavy-handed United States.

It is turning out to be more complicated than that.

Armed factions in Haiti have grown more violent and clashes between peacekeepers and Haitians have raised the risk that people will turn against the foreign troops.

Haiti's infrastructure is in ruins and promised helpings of international aid are slow to appear, exacerbating tensions.

In Brazil, critics say the venture could become Lula's first foreign policy mistake.

"Haiti is a quagmire. I think that Brazil should find a way out," said Ivan Valente, a congressman in Lula's ruling Workers Party who opposed the deployment.

The Brazilians arrived to lead the U.N. mission in June, following a rebellion that forced elected Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile in February. An interim government has promised elections by the end of this year.

The military deployment was Brazil's largest since World War Two. It was part of a foreign policy drive by Lula that would give the South American giant an international influence which matched its size -- and boost its bid for a permanent seat on a revamped U.N. Security Council.

Brazil stressed Haiti's problems were social and economic and that while foreign troops could provide security, the country needed rebuilding for any lasting solution.

The interim government and some U.S. officials chided the U.N. force for failing to disarm former soldiers and pro-Aristide gangs who have fought frequent street battles.

Brazilian officers complained they were hampered by a slow troop buildup. About 6,000 soldiers and 1,400 police are now there, still 1,000 short of the authorized U.N. contingent.

"I refuse to use blind violence without any planning or strategy, which could create many innocent victims because that could trigger an unbearable climate throughout the country," force commander General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro told Haiti's Radio Metropole, responding to the criticism.

But over the last month the soldiers have raided dangerous slums to search for weapons, been attacked by angry mobs, and fought gunmen over police posts and other points around the capital Port-au-Prince.

"NIGHTMARISH FEAR"

A report by the University of Miami's human rights center released on Wednesday said as the violence grew worse, Haitians were living in a "nightmarish fear."

"U.S. police and soldiers, unable to speak the language of most Haitians, are overwhelmed by the firestorm," it said.

Lula's adviser for foreign affairs, Marco Aurelio Garcia, has warned a new crisis could erupt if the international community fails to

deliver \$1 billion in promised funds.

Brazilian opponents of the mission say it gives legitimacy to what they see as a U.S.-engineered coup against Aristide.

"The Brazilians can be seen as an occupation force and instead of being against the real destroyers -- Haiti's elite and U.S. imperialism -- the people could turn against us," Congressman Valente said.

Money and resources would be better spent on Brazil's own problems of poverty and crime -- or sending troops into Rio de Janeiro's violent slums, they say.

Congressman Antonio Carlos Pannunzio of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party said the Lula government had underestimated the situation.

"Lula is obsessed with a permanent seat at the U.N. and he thinks Brazil leading the peacekeeping force is going to get it for us," Pannunzio said.

Still, the Haiti mission has had little impact on Lula's high approval ratings at home, which have been boosted by a booming domestic economy.

And analyst Luis Bitencourt of the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington said Brazil had been right to assume a global role and responsibilities.

If it has to pull out of Haiti because of U.N. failings, its image as a nonaggressive power would not be tarnished. If its soccer diplomacy works and aid arrives, it will look good.

"Brazil has already acquired considerable political and strategic capital," Bitencourt said.

(Additional reporting by Natuza Nery in Brasilia.)