

**U.S.: Haiti Judicial System Needs Reforms**

By EDITH M. LEDERER
Associated Press Writer

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UNITED NATIONS (AP) - The United States called for major reform of Haiti's judicial system Friday, saying the island has such a backlog of cases that many suspects languish in jail awaiting trial for longer periods than if they had been convicted.

Stuart Holliday, the U.S. deputy ambassador to the United Nations, told the Security Council that the United States has asked the U.N. peacekeeping department to discuss the possibility of an assessment of Haiti's judicial system with judicial reform experts.

"We hope that other members agree that the Haitian judiciary is a problem that must be solved in conjunction with police reform, and that an assessment would be a good first step," he said.

Holliday spoke at an open meeting on the council's first-ever trip to Haiti last month, where members focused on coming elections, efforts to end violence and disarm all illegal armed groups, and the need to find jobs and promote economic growth.

During the trip, Holliday said, Haitian officials informed council members "that the backlog of cases is such that most of those imprisoned and awaiting trial in Haiti have already been incarcerated for longer periods of time than if they had been tried and found guilty."

"We find this situation unacceptable," he said. "While there have been some and are some efforts under way to help build the Haitian judicial system, we believe they are insufficient."

Brazil's U.N. Ambassador Ronaldo Mota Sardenberg, who led the mission, said he was "very happy" with the results of the four-day visit.

The council now recognizes "that the problem is serious, that there is hope, and to achieve what we must, elections are fundamental -- and to hold elections you need a number of things to happen in the economic sphere, in the political sphere, in the judiciary," he said.

Sardenberg said he believes Haitian authorities would be willing to accept a mission to assess its judiciary.

"It's acknowledged by Haitians and by the mission that the judiciary has many deficiencies, and also the system of prisons, and that if progress is to be made -- and we wish it to be made -- Haiti will need a better judiciary system."

He noted, for instance, that the Caribbean nation's legal code dates back to Napoleonic times and should be updated.

France's U.N. Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sabliere also supported judicial reform.

He called for improved security and civic education to ensure that elections scheduled for this fall take place in the best possible conditions, and quick economic development projects to provide hope to the Haitian people.

The United Nations has deployed 6,700 troops and 1,622 international police as well as political and human rights experts to help stabilize the troubled Caribbean nation. The Brazilian-led U.N. mission replaced a U.S.-led force that arrived after a three-week uprising toppled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on Feb. 29, 2004.

More than 400 people have died since September in clashes among pro- and anti-Aristide street gangs, police, peacekeepers and former soldiers who helped oust Aristide. After criticism for perceived inaction, U.N. peacekeeping troops and Haitian police have been staging an offensive against armed bands since last month, hoping to prepare a secure environment for elections, but U.N. officials still fear violence could disrupt voting.

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