

**Haiti voter registration slowed by lack of information, destroyed sites, official says**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) - Haiti's voter registration has been slowed by a lack of information, destroyed sites and sluggish training of election workers, a senior Organization of American States official said Tuesday.

So far, about 45,000 out of an estimated 4.4 million eligible voters -- or about 3 percent -- had been registered, said Elizabeth Spehar, who heads the Washington-based OAS' team overseeing registration, whose cutoff is Aug. 9. Elections are scheduled to be held in October and November.

"We are in a situation where we don't have a day to lose," Spehar said in an interview Tuesday. "We need to focus obsessively on opening as many registration centers as possible."

Ideally, most of the 424 planned registration sites would have been opened by late May, but election officials have only opened 14 so far, Spehar said.

Many sites were damaged during an armed rebellion in February 2004 that ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, forcing election officials to look for alternative places, Spehar said. In addition, negotiating leases with landlords to use private buildings as registration centers has been slow, she said.

The training of local workers to run the sites has also not gone according to schedule, she said. There are only about 300 employees out of the 1,700 needed.

Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council is in charge of recruitment and training and spokesman Rosemond Pradel said the training was going according to plan, and that many trained workers hadn't yet been assigned a site. "The 14 open sites have workers," he said.

Though registration began April 25, the voter information campaign didn't start until Monday, with a radio and television ad campaign and pamphlets sent to churches and other local organizations, Spehar said.

Many potential voters have appeared at registration sites without the required identification documents, she said. Those who do not have any IDs can bring two witnesses to vouch for them.

The elections are seen as crucial to strengthening democracy in the Western Hemisphere's poorest country, gripped with outbreaks of violence more than a year after Aristide's ouster.

Hundreds have been killed in political violence since September, when Aristide supporters stepped up protests to demand his return from exile in South Africa.

Spehar said registration centers hadn't encountered any security problems, but soldiers from the 7,400-member U.N. peacekeeping force would guard sites in poor neighborhoods and Aristide strongholds, often hotspots for violence.

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