

REUTERS **Haitian election should be postponed, official says**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, June 2 (Reuters) - A member of a Haitian council trying to organize elections for the fall said on Thursday the vote should be postponed because of lagging preparations and fear of violence.

Patrick Fequiere, chairman of the electoral operations commission within the nine-member Electoral Council, said the European Union had frozen an 8 million euro (\$9.6 million) grant to the agency because it found the council did not have a functioning administration.

"There is no way to respect the current schedule because it is physically impossible, given the means available, to conclude registration operations in time to organize good elections," Fequiere told Reuters.

An election for local government officials is scheduled for Oct. 9, while legislative and presidential elections are set for Nov. 13 with a possible runoff on Dec. 18.

The general election will choose a president to replace Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former priest who was driven from office in February 2004 by an armed revolt and U.S. and French pressure. An interim government has been leading the country since Aristide left.

Fequiere said if all agencies involved in the elections made a maximum effort, they could take place in December.

"Otherwise, we should say goodbye to 2005," he said.

The poor Caribbean country has been plagued by violence since Aristide's ouster, with armed gangs still loyal to the former president battling police. Renegade former soldiers who helped oust Aristide remain in charge of large swaths of the provinces and criminal gangs have started a wave of muggings and kidnappings in the capital.

A Brazilian-led U.N. force of more than 7,000 peacekeepers and police has failed to re-establish order and the Haitian police have been accused by human rights groups of contributing to the violence through summary executions.

The electoral council had hoped to register 4.5 million voters at 424 registration offices between April 25 and July 31. To date, only 72,000, or about 1.5 percent of the estimated electorate, have been registered and only 17 offices set up.

A non-governmental organization supervising the electoral process, known as the CNO, said that even under ideal circumstances it would be impossible to register more than 4 million people in less than 60 days.

The president of the Electoral Council, Max Mathurin, said delays in getting funds and the growing violence had prevented the council from doing its work.

"We could not open offices for registration when we did not have the guarantee that people would be safe," Mathurin said. "It could have been a slaughter. We had to wait for the police and U.N. troops to give us the green light."

Mathurin said the council planned to open another 80 voter registration offices around the country in the coming days but could do nothing in Port-au-Prince because of a lack of security. He would not comment on a possible postponement of the elections.

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