

# The Gazette

## Charest promises Haiti aid: Premier arrives for weekend mission. Leaders escorted under heavy security as violence escalates in Port-au-Prince

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Violence and shootings continued to escalate in the Haitian capital yesterday morning as Premier Jean Charest arrived for a weekend mission.

Responding to a fire that ravaged a market last week, police swooped into a poor neighbourhood and made about 35 arrests.

Dozens were wounded and some killed in the crossfire as the special UN civilian police force and Haitian authorities targeted a criminal gang.

Interim prime minister Gerard Latortue said Charest is sending an important message of support, at a time when people are afraid to travel to Haiti.

But Charest and his entourage were escorted by a heavy security detail, which included local police armed with machine guns and members of the UN civilian police force.

The country is in the midst of preparing for elections for the first time in five years, following the departure of ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004.

"The next election simply constitutes a moment of Haiti's history," said Latortue, after meeting with Charest.

"But what's important is the historic value of this visit."

He said Quebec and Haiti have long had strong links, because of missionaries from the province who used to educate young Haitians.

Today, he said, another generation of Quebecers is benefiting from Haitian immigrants who are teaching them in schools and universities.

Charest agreed to offer training for the future elected government and its civil service through the resources of Quebec's public administration school, l'Ecole nationale d'administration publique.

The aid would be worth up to \$1.5 million, but depends on negotiations between Quebec and Ottawa for subsidies from the Canadian International Development Agency.

"We want to support you through all the measures possible so you can fulfill your mission, which is of primary importance first to the Haitian people, but also to those who want peace in the hemisphere," Charest said, standing next to Latortue at a press conference.

But supporters of former president Aristide said Canadian authorities are doing nothing to stop an oppressive regime in their country that benefits only the rich. Following a rally, members of the Lavalas Party accused the civilian police force of conspiring to attack them.

Nearly 1,000 supporters of Aristide gather every Saturday for political meetings to promote a "real democracy," said party spokesperson Jean-Pierre Simeon. They are determined to use all peaceful measures available to press for the return of Aristide before the elections, added Simeon, 30, who lives in the neighbourhood targeted in yesterday's police operation.

"Now as we speak, there is violence in (the) Belair (neighbourhood)," he said following yesterday's party meeting. "There are some houses burned down ... some members of Lavalas are victims of this violence."

Charest said he didn't have the opportunity to discuss the recent incidents with Latortue, but he defended the civilian police force, which includes 75 officers from Quebec.

"They get their orders from the 'civpol' and from authorities within. And they follow the rules, in terms of respecting people's rights, the same way they would do in Quebec," Charest said.

"So there's no difference between the way they carry on their duties, and what is expected from them back home."

Latortue got testy with a reporter who asked him whether he believed there is abuse, saying only that he had never seen any evidence of wrongdoing.

Some officers have complained about not having the power to crack down on gangs, even though they can identify those responsible for the violence, but Latortue suggested that staging raids is not the right solution.

"Such an operation could have have terrible collateral costs, because often around these bandits and women who are fighting, there are women and children," he said. "If it were to happen very fast, the press would talk about a massacre."

Charest will travel to Gonaives and Saint-Marc today to visit areas affected by floods and last fall's major hurricane.

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Colour Photo: ARIANA CUBILLOS, AP / Jean Charest (right), Haitian interim prime minister Gerard Latortue (centre) and Canadian ambassador Claude Boucher meet the press at the prime minister's office in Port-au-Prince yesterday. The Quebec premier is on a three-day official visit to evaluate the efforts of UN peacekeepers, including Canadian troops, and to meet Haiti's interim leaders, religious groups and human-rights activists.