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Dow Jones & Reuters

Op-Ed

TIME RUNNING OUT IN HAITI

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756 words

23 June 2005

The Boston Globe

THIRD

A11

English

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IT'S TWO MINUTES to midnight in Haiti. When the clock strikes, the country will implode and become a permanent failed state, right on our doorstep. About the only thing that can stop the clock, let alone start winding it back some, is if the Bush administration commits Marines, money, and diplomatic muscle to help the United Nations Mission there.

That may sound alarmist, but it is time to ring the alarm: The daily deterioration of security has now reached panic proportions. Dozens of kidnappings, turf gang battles, and drug-financed or politically motivated killings, some involving the Haitian National Police, spell out the deadly menace in Haiti day after day. The country is on the edge of a complete collapse.

On June 1, the UN Security Council failed to do more than extend the mandate for 24 days. Yesterday, the UN Security Council took up the issue of Haiti again, and while it extended the peacekeeping mandate until next February and took some action to strengthen that mandate, it has to address the crisis more fundamentally.

The critical security issues the UN must tackle are threefold:

First, it must be able to control and reform fully the Haitian National Police. Haiti still has fewer than 5,000 police, too many of whom have questionable backgrounds and suspicious links to drugs, kidnappings, and extrajudicial executions. A far larger UN international civilian police component is needed to exercise sufficient executive control over the Haitian police to suspend the killers, establish effective internal accountability, and locate in police stations around the country to monitor and reform an expanded Haitian police force, to probably double its size today.

To start, the UN civilian police force needs to triple its own current strength (1,200 troops) and with as many French-speaking police as possible. French-speaking international judges are also required for high visibility cases. France, Canada, and other Francophone countries have to step up. The extra 275 civilian police just voted are simply not enough.

Second, the current Brazilian-led UN Mission has to have a stronger military contingent so that its troops are more visible and so it can maintain a rapid reaction capability as well as collect better intelligence. As politically unpalatable as it may seem, Washington needs to put US boots on the ground or at least on a ship offshore with the mobility to move them around the country to demonstrate that there will be security for electoral registration, campaigning, and voting during parliamentary and presidential elections, now scheduled for October through December.

Third, the UN Mission needs to disarm and demobilize the illegal armed groups, including the urban gangs responsible for much of the violence in the capital, many identified with hardline factions of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's party. The ex-Haitian military and their allies, largely outside Port-au-Prince, were part of an insurgency against Aristide and were even called "thugs" by former Secretary of State Colin Powell at one point: They too need to be disarmed and demobilized. And unlike in some previous programs, they should not get promised benefits until they actually give up their weapons and are screened for serious crimes. A timetable needs to be established and implemented region by region, parish by parish.

It has been a year since the UN Mission took over from the multinational coalition, and while the talented Juan Gabriel Valdes, former foreign minister of Chile, heads the UN effort, the overall endeavor has been weakened

by inadequate resources and, until recently, an overly cautious and reactive military strategy.

The US/French-led multinational force that initially prepared the transition failed to get rid of the "spoilers" the drug dealers, ex- army gunmen, armed urban gangs, and violence-prone extremists from the pro- and anti-Aristide camps who simply waited them out. As a Haitian businessman told me recently, "Our people are fleeing the country out of fear."

Until the spoilers are removed from the field, the transition is doomed. Without security, credible elections cannot be held, donor- financed quick-impact projects for job creation are restricted, and private economic investment cannot get off the ground. And without security, the goal of a democratically elected, viable government capable of taking initial steps to lift Haiti out of the depths of poverty, corruption, violence, and despair is stillborn.

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Document BSTNGB0020050624e16n00027

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