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UN Peacekeeping Chief: Haiti Worse than Darfur

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A Brazilian UN peacekeeper patrols the exterior of the church of Notre Dame du Perpetuel

The head of U.N. peacekeeping operations says conditions in parts of Haiti are worse than in Sudan's devastated Darfur region. The official expressed concern that even a newly strengthened peacekeeping force may be unable to provide security for upcoming elections in Haiti's lawless regions.

Undersecretary-General for Peacekeeping Jean-Marie Guehenno says Haiti is at the tipping point. With less than 100 days to go before elections begin, it is an open question whether Haitians can break the long cycle of violence and political failure that has left their country the poorest in the western hemisphere.

The U.N. Security Council recently authorized an additional 1,000 peacekeepers for Haiti through the election season. That brings the total number of U.N. troops to about 8,500. But Mr. Guehenno, who just returned from a five-day tour of the country, predicts that even if the elections can produce a new government, Haiti will need massive foreign assistance, and U.N. peacekeeping troops, for many years.

"One has to recognize it's no quick fix in Haiti. At the moment, the police is broken, they have no resources, no electricity, no phones, no nothing, often no uniforms, cars, the judiciary is weak. So long as you don't have an effective law and order structure that is trusted by people, seen as fair, impartial, has basic means to deliver law and order, you need an international presence there. You don't create a police and rebuild a judiciary in a few months," he said.

Mr. Guehenno added that the plight of Haitians may be even worse than that of the internally displaced people (IDPs) in Sudan's Darfur region, considered the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

"A month ago I was in Darfur, and God knows the situation of the IDPs there is tragic, but at least, thanks to the mobilization of the international community, you see IDPs in camps in al Fasher or cities in Darfur, they have medical facilities, there is drinking water, there are latrines. It's a terrible situation, but some of the basics are being provided by the international community. The Haitians in Cap Haitien, this is a quiet place, they have no drinking water, no latrines, garbage not collected, situation is squalor, its terrible. They are in [a] worse situation than some of the IDPs I saw in Darfur," he noted.

Mr. Guehenno expressed concern that even with 1,000 additional troops, the U.N. peacekeeping force in Haiti may not be strong enough to ensure free and fair elections.

"The troops will never enforce peace if the people are not at peace with themselves," he explained. "If in the elections the Haitians demonstrate they are prepared to focus on the real problems of the country, then our presence even in limited numbers can really help provide that political space. If we see a very polarized situation, I'm worried that the troops won't be enough."

Foreign donors last year pledged more than \$1 billion in development aid for Haiti, but Mr. Guehenno says only a tiny fraction of the funds has been disbursed. He blames bureaucratic obstacles for the delays, and urges donors to make good on their pledges.

U.N. troops were sent to Haiti after former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted by a popular uprising in February 2004. More than 700 Haitians, including dozens of police officers, have been killed since last September, when Aristide supporters stepped up their campaign for his return from exile in South Africa.

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