

Haiti returns to CARICOM's fold

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BASSETERRE, St. Kitts - Two years after Caribbean Community leaders meeting here refused to recognize Haiti's interim government, they returned here Monday to embrace its new president and re-engage CARICOM's poorest member-state.

Haitian President René Prével, fresh from visits to Paris, Brussels and Miami, arrived for the three-day CARICOM summit to officially resume his country's membership in the 15-nation regional bloc.

Haiti's return following a 28-month suspension on the heels of exiled former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's 2004 ouster during an armed revolt was clearly the highlight of Monday's opening ceremony.

But a host of other topics face the CARICOM leaders, including the possibility of pursuing bilateral free trade agreements between the regional bloc and the United States and Canada.

The idea is quickly gaining momentum because the U.S.-backed Free Trade Areas of the Americas has stalled and Washington's Caribbean Basin Initiative, which allows most Caribbean products to come into the United States duty-free, is due to expire in 2008.

"We're looking at Canada and the United States," Richard Bernal, director general of the Regional Negotiating Machinery. "They are very important trading partners for us."

In addition to trade issues, the region faces a laundry list of problems even though many island-nations -- Trinidad and Tobago, Turks & Caicos among them -- are experiencing a building and tourism boom.

Among them: what to do about the exodus of skilled nurses and teachers to the United States and elsewhere, and how to stop the tiny nations from becoming transit and destination points for prostitutes and child workers.

The U.S. State Department recently blasted Belize for not doing enough to address human trafficking, saying its laws were weak and unenforced. Belize's unmonitored borders with Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, the report said, has made it a "source, transit and destination country for men, women and children trafficked for the purpose of labor and sexual exploitation."

Belize was so upset over its placement on the State Department's list of the worst offenders that its government asked that the issue be put on the CARICOM summit's agenda.

"We believe this is a very serious issue that affects all of us," said Belize Foreign Minister Eamon Courtenay. "We would like to explore with our colleagues their views on it. It should be dealt with in a regional, hemispheric way."

But the issue most likely to dominate discussions over the next couple days is the effort by CARICOM to fully implement its own regional trade agreement, known as the Caribbean Single Market and Economy.

Although six countries -- including this twin-island nation in the eastern Caribbean -- are supposed to officially join, bringing the total to 12, there are still many issues to be worked out to help the lesser developed nations feel more comfortable with the agreement.

In addition, leaders here also must figure out how to persuade citizens back home that they their islands won't be taken over by workers from neighboring countries as a result of the agreement, which allows for the free movement of certain skilled workers.