

Bloc embraces reinstated Haiti

After a long absence that began with the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti returned to the fold of the Caribbean Community bloc.

MIAMI HERALD
JUL. 04, 2006

BASSETERRE, St. Kitts - Two years after Caribbean Community leaders meeting here refused to recognize Haiti's interim government, they returned to this two-island nation Monday to embrace its new president and promise to help the bloc's poorest member-state.

"The community stands ready to work with you," CARICOM Secretary General Edwin Carrington told Haitian President René Prével, attending the three-day CARICOM summit to officially resume his country's membership in the 15-nation bloc.

"Today, after years of unrest, Haiti has been able to find constitutional normalcy," Prével replied in his speech. "I hope at the end of my mandate in February 2011, the Republic of Haiti will have taken decisive steps on the long and difficult road of democratic stability and sustainable development."

SUSPENSION

Haiti's return ended a 28-month suspension sparked by the 2004 ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in an armed revolt and his replacement by an interim government regarded by CARICOM as lacking democratic legitimacy.

Though Prével's presence was clearly the highlight of Monday's opening ceremony, CARICOM leaders face a host of other issues during the summit, 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.

Also on the agenda are talks on how Caribbean nations will vote on Venezuela's bid to win a seat on the U.N. Security Council. Washington favors Guatemala for the seat and has been lobbying Western Hemisphere nations to reject Venezuela.

"We need to deepen friendships in our neighborhood and beyond, so that when one door is closed either through arrogance, indifference or domestic preoccupation, we could make a call" to others, said Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Patrick Manning. "We must still go north, but we should also be able to head south, east or west of our borders."

EXODUS

In addition, the CARICOM summit faces the exodus of skilled nurses and teachers to the United States and elsewhere, and how to stop 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 not enforced. 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."

ON THE AGENDA

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 summit's agenda.

"We would like to explore with our colleagues their views on [the issue]. It should be dealt with in a regional, hemispheric way," Belize Foreign Minister Eamon Courtenay said.

One issue likely to dominate much of the summit discussions over the next few days is the CARICOM effort to fully implement its own regional trade agreement, known as the Caribbean Single Market and Economy.

Although six countries are supposed to officially join, bringing the total to 12, there are still many issues to be worked out.

PLENTY TO DO

They include how to help the lesser developed nations feel more comfortable with the agreement and the fear in some islands that they will be overrun by foreign nationals because the pact allows for the free movement of certain skilled workers.

"Our people must be able to move, work and live freely in the region. Without that freedom, our integration process will stagnate and decline," Manning said.