

International donors meet on Haiti

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PORT-AU-PRINCE - Representatives from more than 50 international organizations and nations Tuesday promised \$750 million in aid toward Haiti's efforts to claw its way out of an economic and social pit.

The pledge was \$250 million above Haiti's appeal for an immediate cash input of \$500 million over the next year and a total of \$7.1 billion over five years to fund eight priority projects, including road construction and strengthening the security, education and health systems.

"We are happy for the support and commitment," Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis said at the closing of the day-long International Conference for the Economic and Social Development of Haiti. "This will allow us to erase the burden and errors of past governments."

President René Prével called the promises "an opportunity for Haiti to get back on track on the path to democracy."

The support comes as Haiti struggles with a wave of violence and kidnappings that threatens to destabilize his 10-week old presidency.

Alexis said that even though Haiti is going through a "difficult and turbulent moment," the country's leaders remain hopeful and welcome support for programs that would allow Haiti to "recover its international sovereignty on the path to development, lasting development."

"We are at a new starting point, a turning point where all of our efforts must yield a democratic society," Alexis said. "A new window of opportunity is opening up before us. We must seize this opportunity. We have a country to build."

Alexis said the initial funds would be used to develop projects that would help create jobs, raise salaries and improve electricity, potable water supplies and roads. He called security an "unacceptable" problem and, asked how he planned to combat that issue, said: "There are going to be carrots and sticks."

Alexis also said that before Haiti can ask for outside help, it must do more at home. He had a strong message for people who evade taxes or contribute to rampant corruption and the smuggling of goods.

"The country considers you all as traitors," he said. "My government will fight mercilessly against corruption, smuggling and tax evasion."

International aid just recently began to trickle back into Haiti after years of frozen funds due to political troubles. The European Commission blocked some \$90 million in aid five years ago during the government of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, forced out by a revolt in 2004.

Albert Ramdin, assistant secretary general for the Organization of American States, said Haiti's economic proposal was a "work in progress" that will be reviewed each year.

"Slowly, step by step, we'll have to lay the foundation for sustained growth," he said. "Everybody wants to see Haiti grow and prosper, and not always as a problem."

Edmond Mulet, the U.N. representative in Haiti, pledged continued support but warned that if the security problems are not solved, development would be hindered. The capital has experienced relative calm in the

weeks since Préal's election in February, but a recent rash of killings and kidnappings has heightened tensions again.

Mulet said that in order to preserve stability, the government "must uphold the principles of good government" and develop a strong alliance with the international community.

"We must now, more than ever, act together ... not only for reaffirmation of support but also as a prelude for more concerted efforts," he added.

Among the other organizations that pledged support were the Inter-American Development Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the Organization of American States and the 15-member-nation Caribbean Community.

"Haiti is emerging from a long winter of discontent," said Jamaican Foreign Minister Anthony Hylton. "We all have a responsibility to ensure that the sun remains shining for all Haitian people."