

# Gang members offered aid-for-guns exchange

**The Haitian government and the United Nations prepared to begin a major disarmament plan for rank-and-file street gang members.**

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**PORT-AU-PRINCE** - Haiti's government and U.N. peacekeepers will launch a major campaign to disarm up to 1,000 gang members with promises of money, food and job training, but top gang leaders will not be eligible for the plan, a U.N. envoy said Monday.

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, special U.N. envoy Edmond Mulet said officials will begin airing radio and television ads in coming days to inform the public about the plan.

The move represents the most sweeping effort to persuade well-armed gangsters to lay down their weapons and rejoin society since United Nations troops arrived in the troubled Caribbean nation two years ago to restore order following a February 2004 revolt.

"We are ready to receive 1,000 armed people who would willingly give up their weapons and arms," Mulet said. "We have kits to provide for their families, food and economic assistance. The whole package is ready, and we're going to bring that in place in the following days."

Last month, President René Préval warned gangs based in the sprawling slums of Port-au-Prince to disarm or face death. The gangs, some of which are loyal to ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, are blamed for a spate of recent kidnappings and shootings that officials say are partly aimed at pressuring Préval for concessions.

The initiative targets only rank-and-file gang members, Mulet said. Top gang leaders in the capital's volatile Cite Soleil slum have indicated a willingness to disarm, and the decision to leave them out sets up a potential showdown with the government.

"This is not for the big people responsible for human rights violence or criminal activities or killings or kidnappings. That we have to deal with in a different way," Mulet said.

It will be up to a new seven-member commission to decide who is eligible for the program, Mulet said. Préval will appoint the commission this week in a presidential decree, Mulet said, adding he expects its members will include people "from all different sectors" of Haitian society.

Participants will receive ID cards entitling them to money, medical assistance, food for their families and training for manual labor, including jobs as construction workers, garbage collectors and agricultural workers, Mulet said.

Mulet, a Guatemalan diplomat who took over the 8,800-strong U.N. force three months ago, called the disarmament a "long-term" plan and said it would provide a "big improvement" to Haiti's security if successful.

"We believe 500, 600, maybe 700 people are involved in this kind of illegal activities . . . so I think if we're able to disarm most of them and include them into society and give them some training and assistance in this transition, that's going to be very positive," he said.

The international community is desperate to stabilize Haiti after a decade of failed peacekeeping missions and fruitless efforts to disarm militants. A bid to take weapons off the streets following the 2004 revolt that toppled Aristide yielded mostly dilapidated guns -- not the high-powered Kalashnikovs and M-16s routinely used by gangs.

Mulet acknowledged the challenge ahead but said ``we have to try this."