

UN chief visits Haiti

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PORT-AU-PRINCE --

Three years after arriving in Haiti in the wake of a bloody revolt that ousted the nation's president, U.N. peacekeepers have decimated violent gangs, calmed teeming slums and provided breathing room for a fledgling elected government.

When U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon makes his first visit here Wednesday, he'll find a U.N. force already transitioning from a military to a policing role -- one that officials say is vitally important to keeping the peace while this impoverished Caribbean country rebuilds.

The senior U.N. envoy to Haiti says it is way too soon for the U.N. to consider withdrawing its 8,800-strong, Brazil-led peacekeeping force, noting past failed attempts to help the country.

'An early withdrawal right now would be a big mistake, 'Big' with a capital letter," Edmond Mulet said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. ``This is a time to hold on, to make this work this time."

Ban will meet with President Rene Preval and other political leaders during his 36-hour trip, which comes as the U.N. Security Council prepares to renew the Haiti mandate in October. Ban is expected to ask the council for more specialized forces such as naval units to help Haiti protect its coastline from arms and drug traffickers.

The peacekeepers arrived in 2004 after a revolt toppled former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, touching off a long turf war against well-armed, slum-based gangs blamed for a wave of killings and kidnappings.

Today, blue-helmeted soldiers no longer get shot at or need to launch large-scale raids into slums in search of alleged gunmen. Neighbors simply call and tell soldiers where the gang members are. Mulet said the U.N. mission eventually hopes to use more civilian police than soldiers but is hampered by a world shortage of trained, French-speaking officers.

The peacekeepers provide 85 percent of Haiti's security needs, but the government is working to eventually take over that responsibility. The national police academy is pumping out hundreds of recruits, trying to bolster the nation's small police force of 6,000.

"We don't foresee a return to banditry and criminality in the country," said Alix Fils-Aime, one of Preval's top security advisors. ``The criminals know that the balance of power has changed."

While the improved climate has raised hopes Haiti may finally escape a long cycle of misery, officials say gangs, drug traffickers and chronic poverty still pose a threat and that U.N. troops will be needed at least until Preval's term ends in 2011.

Haiti is still struggling to stand on its own after a 20th century marked by foreign occupations and a 29-year Duvalier family dictatorship. Efforts to build an effective police force are still haunted by the specter of the Duvalier-era's bullying Tonton-Macoute security forces and armed gangs that emerged later to defend Aristide.

"We have to be reminded all the time that this is a very fragile state. To rebuild these institutions is going to take time," Mulet said.

Aid groups say the delivery of foreign aid to the poorest areas of Port-au-Prince are only now gearing up because red tape and logistical problems have slowed delivery.

"Assistance is only starting to trickle into the capital, whose communes have still not perceived the start of a new era," the International Crisis Group warned this month in a report.

When peacekeepers took over providing security from U.S. Marines in June 2004, this former French colony of 8 million was awash in street violence after the three-week revolt that toppled Aristide.

Preval, a populist champion of the poor swept to power in 2006 elections, authorized peacekeepers to take a firm hand and warned gangs "to disarm or die" before a crackdown earlier this year resulted in the arrest or killings of dozens of alleged gang members.

Mulet said that since the crackdown, most of the arrests and security operations carried out by U.N. troops have come from tips provided by people living in the poorest slums. But some people have resorted to vigilante justice, including an attack last week in which people in a rural town seized and beat to death an accused rapist and murderer -- one of a spate of lynchings reported across the country.

"They (residents) have lost the fear of the gangs, which has created another problem of lynching," said Mulet, who has urged church leaders to condemn the practice.

On Friday, Mulet was appointed assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping operations. In September, the Guatemalan U.N. official will be replaced by Tunisian diplomat Hedi Annabi after 14 months with the mission.