

Haiti is not out of the woods yet

OUR OPINION: U.N. SECURITY PRESENCE REQUIRED FOR YEARS TO COME

Opinion
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Encouraging signs of progress are emerging in the most unlikely place -- Haiti. The country is safer, thanks largely to the efforts of MINUSTAH, the U.N. security force. Hundreds of thugs have been disarmed and jailed. You no longer have to wear a flak jacket and helmet to survive a stroll through Cité Soleil. Politically, President René Préval has managed to keep his government relatively stable. But don't be fooled by these fragile gains. Haiti is not out of the woods yet.

The danger is that the relative calm that prevails today will be misinterpreted as a signal that all is well. That would be a mistake. Chronic corruption, petty politics, criminal activity and the lack of an institutional infrastructure present a serious challenge to Haiti's future. Without the U.N. presence, hard-earned progress forged by MINUSTAH could vanish overnight.

The corruption is so bad that Emond Mulet, the head of the U.N. Mission in Haiti, recently had to warn Haitian lawmakers against trying to undermine the government of Mr. Préval and Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis because of a crackdown on drug-running criminals. "Certain deputies and senators should be very careful not to be seen as opposing the government's decision to establish the rule of law in Haiti," Mr. Mulet declared. "These politicians should be careful not to be seen as taking sides with drug traffickers or corrupt individuals."

These are strong words, but fully warranted given reports that some Haitian lawmakers are on the take from drug pushers. Indeed, Mr. Mulet, a Guatemalan diplomat who ends his tenure in Haiti this month, is owed a debt of gratitude for his tireless efforts to improve the situation.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, who visited Haiti last month, plans to ask that MINUSTAH's mandate be extended for another year. This is a good call, especially since earlier extensions were limited to only six months.

A safe environment

Still, Haiti is a long-term project. Recognizing that, defense ministers from nine Latin American countries with troops in the U.N. force met in Haiti last week and called for MINUSTAH's mandate to be extended until 2011.

This makes sense. It will take years for a democratic culture to take root. Previous efforts to aid Haiti have faltered because they were too short-lived. To be effective, the efforts require a security element like MINUSTAH because it is the only way to establish a safe environment that enables civil institutions to exist.

Haiti's political leaders must take advantage of the moment instead of engaging in endless bickering. A U.N. presence is indispensable for the foreseeable future, but someday MINUSTAH will cease to exist. It is up to the current crop of leaders to make sure Haiti is ready for that day.

Sadly, it is far from clear whether they are up to the task.