

U.N. force to remain in Haiti

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UNITED NATIONS --

The U.N. Security Council voted unanimously Monday to extend the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Haiti for a year, noting significant improvements in security in recent months but saying the situation remains fragile.

The U.N. force of more than 7,000 troops and 2,000 international police replaced a U.S.-led force deployed after an uprising toppled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004.

More than 400 people died in clashes involving pro- and anti-Aristide street gangs, police, peacekeepers and ex-soldiers who helped oust Aristide.

Haiti experienced relative calm after President Rene Preval's election in February 2006, but violence flared several months later. A U.N. crackdown on gangs launched late last year has led to a sharp reduction in shootings, but many people still live in squalor and are in desperate need of jobs, hospitals and schools.

In Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, some political leaders and residents of the country's largest slum seemed to welcome the extension, saying a crackdown earlier this year has made life easier in a neighborhood previously run by gangs.

"Last year we couldn't have sat here playing dominoes" because it was so dangerous, 27-year-old construction worker Jean-Baptiste Venel said in the seaside slum of Cite Soleil. "If the U.N. is here for another year it's a good thing for the country and Cite Soleil."

Residents say that Cite Soleil - where people live in rows of bullet-scarred hovels with no electricity or running water - is currently safer than it has been since Aristide's departure.

Senate President Joseph Lambert praised the U.N. resolution but said Haiti must restore its national sovereignty after years of security provided by U.N. troops.

In its resolution, the Security Council acknowledged significant improvements in the country's security situation in recent months, but noted it remains "fragile," in part because of continuing drugs and arms trafficking.

Ban said in a report to the council following his visit to Haiti in August that despite "marginal improvements," the Haitian police force "remains unable to undertake crucial security tasks" without help.

The force's mandate covers mainly Haiti's security needs, but Preval's government has been pressuring the U.N. to funnel more resources into development projects.

The resolution urged the U.N. country team and all humanitarian and development organizations in Haiti to complement security operations by undertaking activities to improve living conditions in the country.