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Preval rejects US advice on presidential election

By JONATHAN M. KATZ (AP) – 2 hours ago

PORTE-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Haiti's president on Wednesday rejected U.S. Senate recommendations on holding an election for his successor, brushing off criticism that the current process will leave the shattered country without a credible leader.

A report issued this month by Sen. Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "strongly encourages" Haiti to let its international partners help restructure the eight-member Provisional Electoral Council, which has been accused of corruption.

The report also recommends ensuring the participation of the key opposition party of ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, which was blocked from participating in 2009 legislative contests because of a dispute over rival candidate lists.

On Tuesday, President Rene Preval fulfilled one recommendation of the report by issuing a signed decree setting election day for Nov. 28.

But speaking at a news conference in an open-air gazebo alongside the broken remains of the national palace a day later, Preval told reporters he had no intention of complying with the rest, including changing the election body, known as the CEP.

"I'm not doing the CEP with international partners. I'm doing the CEP with national partners," Preval said. "The senator's proposition is inadmissible."

Seeking to show the council was not "hand-picked," as he said in English, Preval handed out copies of nomination letters for the panel's members submitted by various national and religious organizations, including the National Council of Political Parties, Roman Catholic Church and National Confederation of Haitian Vodou.

He also defended the prohibition on the exiled Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party in last year's elections, a ban that came after rival factions of the party submitted competing lists of candidates.

"International donors need to look for an accord with the CEP and the political parties and the factions of Fanmi Lavalas," Preval said. "We are giving (the parties) the support that they need, and the factions need to figure it out (for themselves)."

Preval did not discuss the forced resignation of an electoral council member accused of stealing a staffer's pay or opponents' allegations that the council gave special privileges to the president's newly formed Unity Party ahead of planned Feb. 28 legislative elections, which were postponed because of the Jan. 12 earthquake that devastated the capital.

He also declined to answer questions about another U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report that criticizes Haiti's earthquake recovery, saying he would address that issue at a news conference on reconstruction next week.

Elections have never been easy in Haiti, a country whose founding president crowned himself emperor. It took 186 years to hold what the international community considered a democratic election in 1990, which was then closely followed by a coup d'etat.

Preval, in fact, is the only Haitian ever to be elected president, serve a full term and hand off power to an elected successor. Unable to run for re-election in the November contest, he pledged to relinquish power again as he did in the 1990s — after protesters alleged earlier this year that he was dragging his feet on holding presidential the election.

Doing so will require significant help. The electoral council's headquarters were destroyed and its records lost in the quake, while millions of voters were either killed, made homeless or displaced. Its new headquarters is a former Gold's Gym seized by drug agents.

The election will also be a cost burden for this grindingly poor Caribbean nation: \$29 million according to electoral officials at the news conference with Preval, \$38 million according to the U.S. Senate report.

The Organization of American States and United Nations have pledged support. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement Wednesday praising the decree setting the election date and pledged the help of U.N. peacekeepers and advisers in preparing and supporting the ballot. Ban urged member states to quickly provide the money needed to run the vote.

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