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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 10:44 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Haiti's prime minister targeted for ouster by lawmakers - Miami Herald

From: Morgan, Jack A
Sent: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 10:27 AM
To: NEWS-Haiti; NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O_Shift-II
Subject: RE: Haiti's prime minister targeted for ouster by lawmakers - Miami Herald

Haiti's prime minister targeted for ouster by lawmakers

Haitian senators want to oust the country's prime minister, claiming she has moved too slowly in addressing crucial problems.

BY JACQUELINE CHARLES
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PORT-AU-PRINCE -- With Haiti poised to enjoy the economic benefits of long-elusive stability, foreign diplomats are scrambling behind the scenes to keep it all from unraveling as several lawmakers demand the ouster of the country's prime minister.

A small but powerful group of senators is seeking the removal of Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis -- and possibly several of her ministers -- on charges that she has moved too slowly to solve Haiti's problems.

"The situation is critical," said Sen. Jean Hector Anacasis, who is among the six senators behind a recent summons for Pierre-Louis to appear before Haiti's Senate on Thursday. Under Haiti's constitution, the Senate can fire a sitting government.

"We are the ones on the ground who hear the people's cry, who hear them criticizing us, the government, saying nothing has been done. We have to replace the woman," Anacasis said. "If they are accusing us of inviting a crisis, then we are inviting a crisis to avert another crisis."

The internal political maneuvering comes just three weeks after former U.S. President and U.N. Special Envoy to Haiti Bill Clinton led a historic trade mission here, triggering optimism that this land of seemingly missed opportunities may finally be turning around.

Before a gathering of 600 investors -- 200 of them foreign -- Clinton championed Haiti's stability, promising that the risks were the lowest they have ever been in a crisis-prone Haiti. Now, both Haitian and foreign observers fear that political differences could trigger a crisis and send potential investors packing.

"They cannot afford to do this. It is not good for investments," said one diplomat who asked for anonymity because of the sensitivity of what is viewed as a domestic matter. "It is all so frustrating."

On Monday, diplomats spent the day shuffling between meetings with President René Préal, and discussions with Pierre-Louis. The matter even warranted a weekend phone call to Préal from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Clinton spoke of her concerns and reiterated U.S. support for Pierre-Louis, according to several sources privy to the conversation.

Préal, in turn, told Clinton that he was not behind the move to oust Pierre-Louis and has no control over the lawmakers. Critics disagree, pointing out that following the recent Senate elections, marred by fraud allegations and low turnout, Préal now controls two-thirds of the chamber, and that most of the six senators leading the charge are from his Lespwa (HOPE) political coalition.

POLITICALLY RISKY

Still, some are asking whether he's willing to spend the political capital to prevent the ouster of Pierre-Louis, a one-time friend and confidante who accepted her appointment as a storm-battered Haiti was gripped by political gridlock after the Senate fired then-Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis following food riots then failed to ratify two of Préal's choices.

Neither Préal nor Pierre-Louis responded to interview requests from The Miami Herald. In a taped message to the nation Monday night, Pierre-Louis defended her government's record and explained her reasons for taking the job.

Since her appointment a year ago, Pierre-Louis has appeared often before parliament but this is the first time she has been summoned, a move that usually signals a no-confidence vote.

Pierre-Louis has mustered considerable support abroad from her many trips, including stops in South Florida. But she has failed to win over supporters in parliament. Her dismissal, in effect, would topple her government.

Initially, senators were seeking to dismiss the ministers of finance and justice, both of whom are close to Pierre-Louis. But after three days of meetings at a hotel near the palace, senators decided to issue the summons to Pierre-Louis, Anacasis told The Miami Herald.

A majority of the 29 senators have indicated they would vote to fire Pierre-Louis, Anacasis said.

Pierre-Louis was in Europe on business, and returned to Haiti Sunday night where she was greeted by a small group of protesters waving signs saying, "We are tired of changing governments."

In her defense, a handful of lawmakers and supporters have pleaded with the group of six to cancel Thursday's hearing.

'SELF-INTEREST'

"Since becoming prime minister, she has struggled with limited human and financial resources and with a structure of government that has been emasculated over decades of mismanagement and selfish politics," said Robert Maguire, a Haiti expert at Washington, D.C.-based Trinity University.

"She has had to confront the narrow politics of self-interest imposed upon her ability to govern. And yet, she has persevered, building a solid track record of relief and recovery in the aftermath of Haiti's devastating storms of late 2008 and thereby contributing immensely to that spirit of Haiti's hope for a brighter future."

It's unclear what has triggered the move, though some believe it revolves around Haiti's presidential elections. While still a year away, political jockeying already has begun, with some suggesting politicians may be seeking to position themselves and candidates for the scheduled November 2010 elections.

Meanwhile on Monday, as politicians weighed whether Pierre-Louis would fight or resign, some supporters tried to persuade her to visit Préval to see if the two could reach a compromise. She has said she will fight, but has no plans to go before parliament and be humiliated. That has some wondering whether she would resign before Thursday.

Patrick Delatour, Haiti's tourism and acting commerce minister, said lawmakers should weigh the consequences of their actions carefully.

"They should understand solving problems by any government is a process, a slow process," he said. "Firing this government does not mean the next government will be able to solve the problems any faster. It definitely means the process of solving problems will stop and will have to start again."

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