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HAITI

After nearly 14 years, blue-helmet U.N. peacekeepers leave Haiti with an unclear future



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As the United Nations wound down its 13 1/2-year peacekeeping operation in Haiti last month, Sandra Honoré, the Trinidadian diplomat who had steered the country through a deadly hurricane, a protracted political crisis and a presidential election, wondered if the fragile nation would finally get a break.

A powerful Hurricane Irma was threatening the northern coast, and the U.N. Stabilization Mission, known by its French acronym MINUSTAH, had reduced its presence as the last of its blue-helmet soldiers prepared to depart.

“We are going to support the government to the extent of our capacity, to the extent of our engineering contingent, until their departure,” said Honoré, the sixth diplomat and only woman to have served as the U.N. secretary-general’s special representative in Haiti.

Haiti escaped the worst of Irma’s wrath and, on Sunday, the peacekeeping mission comes to an official end, leaving behind a mixed legacy of stability and controversy. But as a smaller mission focused on justice, human rights and police development — with a new acronym, MINUJUSTH — prepares to take over Monday, there is a lingering question: Can Haiti go forward without a large multinational military presence?

“The U.N. has been present in Haiti for nearly 14 years,” Haitian President Jovenel Moïse told the *Miami Herald*. “If after so many years, the country is not ready to take charge of its security

and peacefully secure its future, this would be a collective failure for Haitians and the international community, which has made enormous sacrifices for the stabilization of the country.

“We are convinced that despite certain social and political difficulties, the Haitian people and the leaders that they have provided themselves with through democratic elections, are ready to assume their future with ambition, and in a spirit of national concord,” he added.

Last month, as he addressed the U.N. General Assembly for the first time since his February inauguration, Moïse announced that he was remobilizing the country’s defunct army to fill the security vacuum being left by departing peacekeepers. He also insisted that the U.N. stop considering Haiti a threat to the region’s security and remove it from a “Chapter 7” designation, which allows the U.N. Security Council to deploy forces to restore peace.

“The conversion of MINUSTAH to MINUJUSTH is the recognition of the progress made by our country in recent years,” said Moïse, who has so far refused to give the green light for MINUJUSTH. “Today, Haiti is no threat to regional and global peace and security.”

Honoré said Haiti has made significant progress since U.N. forces arrived in 2004 amid massive street protests and a bloody rebellion that toppled democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

“The Haitian people enjoy a considerable degree of security and greater stability. Political violence has diminished considerably. Armed gangs no longer hold the population hostage,” she told the Security Council Thursday as she addressed it for a final time. “All three branches of power are in place with the executive and legislative branches restored to full functioning.”

Honoré said she was encouraged by Moïse’s recent moves to rein in public spending and speak out against corruption. She also lauded his signature Caravan of Change initiative to increase agriculture yields through public works projects.

Immediate improvements, however, “have yet to be felt by the vast majority of the population, particularly in poor urban areas,” Honoré said.

Haiti’s political situation remains fragile, she said, underscoring the importance of the role of the smaller justice-focused mission, which will continue efforts to strengthen the Haiti National Police. She listed some of the difficulties still facing the country, which lately has been engulfed in weekly and sometimes violent protests. They include, “the widely contested 2017-2018 budget, stalled indirect elections, disagreements over the reestablishment of the Armed Forces of

Haiti, coupled with the known weaknesses of state institutions, as well as the absence of significant improvement in the difficult living conditions of much of the population,” she said.

A serious negotiator whose French-sounding last name made her an enigmatic figure among Haiti’s politicians, Honoré said she is confident that Haiti’s warring political factions can now solve their differences on their own. But only Haitian authorities can ensure that peacekeepers won’t return, she told the Miami Herald.

“It will all depend on the way governance is conducted in the country and on the dedication of the actors to arrive at some consensus on the minimum that is required in the interests of all across political lines, and across political convictions,” Honoré said.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said that he believes that Haiti still has a long way to go, but he doesn’t think it needs military forces.

“I think they need a police presence and to build up institutions,” which will be the focus of the new U.N. mission, he said.

Often the target of local protests, the previous mission was marred by sexual abuse scandals involving soldiers and the introduction of cholera to Haiti by Nepalese peacekeepers 10 months after the country’s devastating January 2010 earthquake. But Guterres said the U.N. still accomplished a lot that isn’t widely known.

“It will not be possible for people to fully understand all of the positive aspects of peacekeeping missions in general, and MINUSTAH in particular,” he told the Herald. “But I hope that there will be progressive recognition that a lot was done and things would be much worse if the mission was not there.”

During its tenure, the U.N. staved off multiple crises allowing Haiti to usher in three presidential elections and relatively peaceful transfers of power; improved security; and helped clean up and strengthen a once deeply politicized police force, which now numbers 14,000. Peacekeepers also aided after multiple disasters including the quake that left more than 300,000 dead and last year’s Hurricane Matthew.

“In both instances, clearly without the U.N., it would have meant thousands of more unnecessary deaths and slower response to the needed population,” said Jean-Max Bellerive, the country’s prime minister during the earthquake who also served as chief of staff to interim President Jocelerme Privert when Matthew hit the southern peninsula.

Robert Maguire, a longtime Haiti watcher at George Washington University, said while most will remember the mission for its “delayed and ineffective response” to cholera — a crisis of its own making — people should not forget that the U.N. “entered Haiti at a time of great violence and chaos, and played an important role in quelling that.”

He said the mission “achieved its goal of stability in Haiti during the time of its presence there. One indicator of this was the fact that the country’s leaders could travel abroad without the fear of their overthrow while they were away.”

Maguire said it also “sometimes played an important role in counterbalancing the tendency of U.S. authorities to want to run ragged over Haiti. MINUSTAH’s presence in this regard may be missed, particularly if Haitian authorities cannot or do not stand up for Haiti.”

Robert Fatton, another Haiti expert, is less complimentary. Fatton said while the U.N.’s military interventions against armed groups, especially in the urban slums, contributed to a substantial improvement in Haiti’s security and stability, “the causes of the violence have not been removed.

“In fact, it is unlikely that the limited gains made will be sustainable because the extreme poverty and inequality that generated the violence in the first place persist,” said Fatton, who teaches political science at the University of Virginia. The mission’s record after more than a decade of occupation “is at best fragile. It has failed to change the social and economic conditions that led to its own creation. The future remains as uncertain and problematic as ever,” he said.

Juan Gabriel Valdés, Chile’s ambassador to the United States and the first person to head the mission starting in 2004, shares in Fatton’s uncertainty about the future.

There were successes, he said — for example, the 2006 election that returned Haiti to democratic order with the election of President René Préval and the unprecedented involvement of Latin American nations in Haiti’s stability.

But the challenges that remain — corruption, lack of institutions and the country’s culture of non-agreement — makes him question the overall legacy of the peacekeeping mission in Haiti that in the end was only able to sustain elections and governments but not change the political culture.

“It was not capable of solving problems that only Haitians can solve,” said Valdés, noting that he’s not optimistic about what will happen next in a post-peacekeeping Haiti. “In one sense, MINUSTAH is proof that only Haitians can solve their own problems.”

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