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At Global Meeting, Haiti Tries to Turn a Page

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti—President Michel Martelly will address this year's U.N. General Assembly on Friday with promises of a fresh start for the earthquake-devastated nation. It will be a tough message to sell.

Mr. Martelly, a 50-year-old former pop star turned president, said in an interview that decades of cooperation between the international community and Haiti has led to little progress, but that things this time could be different. "I'm going to tell them that this time there is someone with a really big heart who wants to change things," he said.

For much of the past year, the country's politics have paralyzed the recovery from last year's earthquake that killed an estimated 200,000 and leveled parts of the capital. Mr. Martelly and his team work out of a prefabricated building in the parking lot of the collapsed presidential palace.

Months of electoral campaigning late last year led to two chaotic presidential elections and then months of a transition between governments. Mr. Martelly was finally installed last May, but has been unable to form a government because his attempts to name a prime minister have been repeatedly blocked by parliament.

Twenty months after the earthquake, there is little visible improvement in Haiti's shattered capital. Only half of the estimated 9 million cubic meters have been removed, and hundreds of fractured office buildings and dwellings are a constant danger to claim more lives. Some 600,000 refugees still live in sprawling and unhygienic tent cities.

An ongoing cholera outbreak has claimed 6,266 lives, hospitalized nearly half a million and threatens to grow at any moment with the daily flash storms of the hurricane season, according to the office of the U.N.'s Resident Coordinator.

Haiti's parliament, which turned down Mr. Martelly's first two nominees for prime minister, is dominated by lawmakers from rival parties who lost to Mr. Martelly in last year's elections.

The country needs a stable government to convince donors to disburse more reconstruction money. At stake are billions of dollars pledged by international donors. Only 38% of \$4.6 billion earmarked for 2010 and 2011 have been disbursed, according to the U.N.'s Office of the Special Envoy.

Despite the woes, there are signs of hope. Haiti's lower house, after rejecting Mr. Martelly's first two candidates for prime minister, last Friday finally approved Dr. Garry Conille, a 45-year-old gynecologist and career U.N. diplomat. Haiti's senate has yet to act, but officials are hopeful that the approval is coming.

"I am confident it will happen while I'm in New York," Mr. Martelly said, adding that the political tug-of-war has helped him find common cause with his rivals that could help Haiti in the long-run. "It has enabled us to iron out differences I was naive at first. I've politically matured."

Nigel Fisher, the head U.N. coordinator for Haiti's reconstruction, said progress has been very slow but points out that donors have not given up.

"You're not seeing a backing of donors, you're not seeing that lack of interest."

Mr. Fisher said the big problem for Haiti lies in the enduring humanitarian crisis compounding the country's long term recovery. "We're caught in this bind that we all agree the solutions are long term but we have immediate needs that are falling through the cracks. Let's not forget those that need help now."

One of Mr. Martelly's key initiatives is to rebuild 16 neighborhoods at a cost of \$98 million. But so far, only \$30 million has been promised by the Haiti Reconstruction Fund, a partnership between Haiti and international donors.

There are also growing tensions over some 12,000 U.N. peacekeepers that has been in Haiti since 2004. Mr. Martelly wants to rebuild Haiti's army, and eventually see all peacekeepers leave. Haiti has not had an army since it was disbanded in 2005 by the firebrand former president, Jean Bertrand Aristide. The U.N. has said it will reduce the size of the force but extend its mandate by a year.

Many Haitians have grown wary of the peacekeepers. Experts believe Nepalese troops may have inadvertently brought the cholera epidemic to Haiti, its first such epidemic in decades. Five Uruguayan sailors accused of sexually abusing a young Haitian man were jailed in Uruguay this week while an investigation proceeds.

The president has formed an economic advisory council comprised of 32 international experts, including eight former heads of state and five CEOs, to attract investment and sell Haiti overseas. It is co-chaired by former U.S. President Bill Clinton.

The council held its first meeting on Wednesday in New York, where Mr. Martelly pledged to create a more business-friendly Haiti. He said his government would submit bills to cut the time it takes to open a business or get a construction permit.

"The opportunity to bring in foreign direct investment into Haiti has never been better," said Denis O'Brien, CEO of Digicel, a big cell phone company in the Caribbean.