



Foreign Policy: Rebranding Haiti



Michel Joseph Martelly, President of Haiti, speaks during the United Nations General Assembly Sept. 23, 2011 at UN headquarters in New York.

By Colum Lynch
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Longtime Washington Post correspondent Colum Lynch reports on all things United Nations for Turtle Bay.

President Michel Martelly, the Haitian leader formally known as Sweet Micky, came to New York to "rebrand" the image of the troubled Caribbean island in his first visit to address the U.N. General Assembly.

Haiti, he said, has some of the most beautiful coastline in the world. It has great art, great music, and a rich history as the world's first independence movement. Oh, and it's got Voodoo. "Do you know how many people would like to come to Haiti and try to understand what Voodoo is?" he asked me in an interview in his midtown Manhattan suite at the New York Palace Hotel.

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Martelly, a [former kompa singer](#) known for his [raucous performances](#) and for disrobing on stage, has spent the week promoting Haiti before audiences of foreign investors, political leaders, and celebrities. It's a tall task, but if anyone's up to the challenge it's Martelly.

Martelly has remade his own image from flashy, dress-wearing performer to a pro-business champion who now favors more presidential wear, primarily conservative suits. He said he wants to wash away the country's reputation as the Western Hemisphere's basket case.

"I want to rebrand Haiti," he said. "The image of poor Haiti who wants to turn to the world and beg for money is over." (Though he admits to privately urging foreign donors to live up their commitment to provide billions in reconstruction aid. Martelly said Haiti has received nearly \$4 billion of the \$10 billion pledged to Haiti after the country's devastating earthquake.) "In the future, we will be mainly interested in bringing investors to Haiti and creating jobs. We will not just welcome [foreign

investors] but we will secure their investments and address every single issue that scares them, offer tax incentives, any type of incentive to attract them."

The effort has been a challenge. Diplomats, U.N. officials, and analysts have decried the lack of progress in Haiti 18 months since a devastating earthquake left 250,000 dead, and wiped out much of the U.N. mission staff there. A devastating cholera epidemic, possibly introduced into the population by Nepalese peacekeepers, has left nearly 5,000 dead. A U.N. panel, established by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, provided substantial circumstantial evidence suggesting that the cholera emerged from the Nepalese base, but stopped short of blaming them for it.

"Eighteen months after the earthquake, Haiti's future...remains uncertain to most citizens," states the June International Crisis Group (ICG) [report](#).

Despite about \$4 billion in foreign assistance, the country has been unable to resettle more than 650,000 people who still live in roughly 1,000 makeshift encampments around the capital, Port-Au-Prince, according to the ICG report. Martelly, a political novice who was elected in a landslide this March, says it's a fair question to ask what happened to the money.

Martelly said that when he took office, functionaries explained that a large amount of money had been spent on basic life-saving supplies, like water and food, and other vital necessities. He doesn't know what to believe. "We can waste our time trying to find out if it's the truth or we can also decide to make of the future something better, something different," he said. "I have chosen to make the future something different."

Martelly acknowledged that his inexperience has contributed to a political stalemate with the Haitian parliament, which is dominated by former Prime Minister René Préval's party, Lespwa, over the formation of a new government. The parliament has blocked two candidates he selected to serve as prime minister. But he says his effort to form a new government is now on the right path. The lower house of parliament has already approved his latest candidate for prime minister, Gary Conille, who once served as an aide to Bill Clinton — who has been informally advising the new Haitian president on how to attract outside investment.

Martelly scoffed at the ICG report's grim account of the reality in Haiti, saying they were produced by people who make a living out of documenting Haiti's woes. "Haiti is not only about misery; Haiti is not only about cholera; Haiti is not only about insecurity," he said. "There is no more insecurity in Haiti than there is in Chicago. There is no more insecurity in Haiti than there is in New York."

Martelly has been pressing the United Nations, which has come under fire for possibly triggering the country's first cholera outbreak in a century, to draw down its force of more than 8,000 U.N. peacekeepers. Martelly said he's looking to the U.N. to ensure that the cholera epidemic is eradicated. "We could keep complaining about what happened or we are going to solve it," he said. "I'd rather work at solving. I'd rather work with the U.N. and ask them for support."

But there are still flare-ups. Recently, four Uruguayan peacekeepers [stood accused](#) by Haitian authorities of sexually molesting a young Haitian man, in an emotionally charged case that has led to a formal apology from the Uruguayan president. Martelly said he has personally asked Ban to ensure that the Uruguayan peacekeepers are held accountable. But he said that he favors a gradual drawdown that would give Haitians time to fill the vacuum. "We need the U.N. then, we need the U.N. now, and we will continue to need them for a while, until we are able to be self sustainable."

In an effort to achieve self-reliance, Martelly plans to create a national army to impose law and order, defend the country's borders, and provide a range of services — including helping to plant forests and respond to natural catastrophes. The proposal, which is being discussed with donor countries, is controversial — especially given the history of military repression under previous Haitian

governments. A top U.N. official told Turtle Bay that no foreign donors will provide Haiti with the money to build a national army. But Martelly said it's a necessity.

"We have an army today and it's a foreign army," he said of the more than 8,000 U.N. peacekeepers. "Why don't we have our own? And if it's our own, it's an opportunity to give jobs to young Haitians and an opportunity for the U.N. to withdraw."

"We have a national police force, which is still weak," he said. An army, he said, would do a better job of restoring order, defending borders, pacifying rioters, and come to the rescue when the country faces natural disasters. "You need something stronger than just police."