

Haiti now needs investment, not charity, Jean says

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Former governor-general Michaëlle Jean has a message for Canadians about Haiti: The country now needs investment, not charity.

Ms. Jean, UNESCO's special envoy to the Caribbean nation, praised the international outpouring of aid that followed her homeland's crippling earthquake nearly two years ago. But with a "responsible" government now installed in Port-au-Prince, she says, the country sees its recovery through more than handouts.

"We have to stop infantilizing Haiti," Ms. Jean said in an interview from Ottawa. "Aid is good in a crisis situation. But once the crisis is over, you have to build on what's sustainable."

Ms. Jean made the comments as she prepared to come to Montreal to honour a non-profit group, Equitas, that gives human-rights training to Haitians and others from around the world; the trainees then bring their know-how to their communities back home.

Ms. Jean saw Montreal-based Equitas's work in the poorest quarters of Port-au-Prince during a trip in September. "For those young people, it was a way to become responsible, to say, 'I can do something to improve the living conditions in not just my neighbourhood but the whole country.'"

Trade-not-aid has become a new mantra in post-earthquake Haiti as President Michel Martelly struggles to rebuild an economically shattered nation. Although Haiti has long been heavily reliant on foreign assistance, funnelled through thousands of NGOs, Ms. Jean says it's time for a "profound change in the paradigm."

"People want to get out of their total dependence on international aid," she said. Jobs are crucial in a nation where more than half the population is under age 25. "You can't think about development on the basis of charity. The Haitian people love to work."

Ms. Jean continues travelling across Canada, partly for the Michaëlle Jean Foundation, and was recently named chancellor of the University of Ottawa. With her days at Rideau Hall behind her, she says that perhaps what she misses most is contact with Canadian soldiers and their families that came through the GG's position as commander-in-chief.

Her onetime job helping victims of domestic violence – she worked in battered women's shelters in Quebec for eight years – came into play when dealing with soldiers returning from combat missions in Afghanistan, she says. Some struggled with posttraumatic stress disorders.

“You can’t take part in these kinds of missions and come back unscathed. It’s impossible,” she said. She worked not just alongside military commanders but directly with soldiers and their families.

“I put everything I knew from counselling to accompany the families, the wounded,” she said. “I know how to listen, what to say, how to support people in mourning.”

Canada’s military suffered major casualties during her five years at Rideau Hall. “When I began, Canada had lost six soldiers in Afghanistan,” she said. “When I left, we surpassed 150 victims. I accompanied all those families.”

“In a way,” she added, “the military families became my family.”