

INTERVIEW WITH JUAN GABRIEL VALDÉS, HEAD OF THE UN MISSION IN HAITI (MINUSTAH)

## “Our Countries’ Armed Forces Are Important Factors For Regional Integration”

*Paola Wächter\**

*When the head of the UN Mission in Haiti returned to Port-au-Prince, after a brief but intense visit to Madrid, early March, he left one thing very clear: that his main goal, immediate and decisive for the process of stabilizing the country was to consolidate the celebration of the second round of the country’s legislative elections<sup>1</sup>. This is the top priority, given that for René Préval, the president that was elected after the elections held on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February<sup>2</sup> to swear in his position, he must do so before a Congress elected through the polls, as explains Juan Gabriel Valdés the diplomat.*



The representative of the United Nations’ Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, knows what he is talking about. The complex and four times postponed general election was a good indicator<sup>3</sup> of the fact that this was a difficult process to bring to an end. Right he was. One week before returning to Caribbean soils, after his journey through Santiago de Chile and Madrid, to request before these countries’ authorities that their military troops remain in Haiti, the election calendar was changed once again. The new date for the second round of the legislative elections is the 21<sup>st</sup>. of April, and no longer the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, as had been established, thereby postponing Préval’s swearing in of office for the 29<sup>th</sup> of April.

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1 The Haitian people elected members of Parliament at the same time as they elected a President in the elections held on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February, but a second legislative round is necessary, as no candidates obtained more than the required 50%, as established in the electoral law. Therefore, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, Haitians are called upon to elect 30 Senators and 90 members of the House of Representatives. The Electoral Council believes that the results of this election should be available by the 28<sup>th</sup> of April. Haiti has not had a working Parliament since January 2004.

2 René Préval, President between 1996 and 2001, won the Parliamentary elections in 2006 with 51.15% of the ballots, after a political solution reached by the Provisional Electoral Council on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February.

3 The general elections were called and postponed four times by the transitional government created after the fall and exile of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2004.

By now, and with such precedents, a further postponement is not impossible, in a country where nobody dares to say the last word, and even less when it comes to the instauration of a new Government, in what would only be the beginning of a long odyssey to try and solve the myriad problems of a nation rocked by hunger and internal conflicts.

The former Chilean Ambassador to the UN, Juan Gabriel Valdés, now ready to abandon his position at the helm of MINUSTAH<sup>4</sup>, reviews the management, work and challenges of the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti. Highlighting the formula of using South American forces for the solution of regional problems, he talks of the country, its present and a future branded by uncertainty and the pressing need for international assistance, at a point that he considers crucial for the island.

**- A few weeks after the general elections, how does MINUSTAH evaluate the process, and the results of the elections? What do they imply for Haitians?**

*Answer.-* Our evaluation is very positive. These Haitian elections are unique in the country's history. Never before had the citizens voted with a purpose-made, modern identity card which includes their photograph and fingerprint. Neither had citizens voted with an electoral register that guaranteed the legitimacy of the process, nor had they ever voted in polling centers surrounded by international election observers and representatives of the different political parties. Therefore, despite all the difficulties, regarding Haitian problems such as poor means of communication, transport and the country's geography, it is clear that these elections have been the "cleanest" in its history. This is something that the Haitian people understood beforehand, and which made for an extraordinary participation rate.

A participation rate of 63% was something clearly unexpected, especially when so many projected that violence was going to hinder people's participation and that the distances between the polling centers and people's places of residence was going to lead to massive abstention rates. In the end, that turned out to be pure fiction. In reality, Haitians walked three to four hours to reach polling centers and queued patiently waiting to cast their vote. Possibly the most serious problem, was due to the inherent difficulties in city centers, there was excessive crowding in centers; and secondly, many polling stations opened later than what was prescribed. Having said this, it is evident that problems emerged during the communication of results; which was done in a tardy, and clumsy, manner by the Electoral Council, putting the whole process at risk. In the end, the Council was forced to take a decision giving victory to the candidate that had won the election -Mr. Préval- with 49.3% of the cast ballots, against 11% gained by the sum of all the other candidates. Nobody can argue that this gentleman won the election; therefore the decision taken by the Electoral Council, however political it was, seems to me to recognize the fundamental issue that is the will of the Haitian people.

**-Haiti now has an elected president, but the feeling of fraud is still present, after the incident with the ballot papers and the manner in which the process was brought to an end<sup>5</sup>. Do you believe that these precedents undermine the**

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4 MINUSTAH, the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, was created by the United Nations Security Council, through Resolution 1542, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2004, for an initial six-month period. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004 it incorporated under its responsibility, authority over the Provisional Multinational Force (PMF), authorized by the Security Council in February 2004. MINUSTAH which incorporates around 9,000 personnel (7,265 soldiers and 1,741 police forces), its mandate was to expire on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2006, but this has been renewed for a further six months. <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/304/30/IMG/N0430430.pdf?OpenElement>

5 The agreement by which René Préval was proclaimed the winner, allowed him to be victorious without needing a second round, despite not having reached 51% of the cast ballots, as established in the original counting system.

**legitimacy of the polling, and in what manner do you think that they may affect the country's future governability?<sup>6</sup>**

A.- I would say that the rumors of fraud are a very Haitian exaggeration. In Haiti, any average fear immediately becomes a panic. *La panique* is a commonplace term, while a catastrophe may be a minor setback. Therefore, and as I told president Préval, it would be the first time in my life that I hear talk about massive fraud regarding a candidate that is 38 points ahead of the candidate in second place. I would therefore say that there is no basis for such rhetoric. There was a loss of 5% of the ballots, which is basically the product of the fact that polling center presidents did not handover the ballots under their responsibility, and of centers that were attacked. In any case I do not think that 5% is a number that leads to claims that the elections have lost legitimacy.

**-Looking towards the future, which are the main challenges that Haiti faces in political, social and institutional terms, as well as in peace-building and reconstruction? What is the horizon that MINUSTAH is preparing itself for in Haiti?**

A.- Finalizing the election process and allowing for the legitimate swearing in of the country's president. According to the Constitution, René Préval must swear in his position before a Congress chosen by popular suffrage, thereby it would be a grave error not to treat the legislative elections in the same manner as the presidential elections. Therefore, the first thing I must do upon returning to Haiti, is to ensure that the Electoral Council continues to advance towards the celebration of the second round of the legislative elections. But there are other tasks to carry out, such as continuing with the rigorous and disciplined training of a new police force, which has already begun, but which must reach 25,000 persons, whereas it is currently only at 6,000. Thirdly, a solution must be found for the Cité Soleil problem, and that of the armed bands in Port-au-Prince, to which end MINUSTAH and the new Government must work hand in hand. Finally, we must maintain the pressure on the international donors in order to maintain the level of aid that reaches Haiti.

**-You are about to reach the end of your term as head of MINUSTAH, after nearly two years, which are the most outstanding achievements in your opinion?**

A.- The country's stabilization. There is no armed group that can impose itself upon the new Government, which can threaten the country. Furthermore, the Mission managed to organize an election, which was its second priority. Having said this, it is obvious that a lot remains to be done. I would say that the main task that remains - and the one we have had most problems with- is disarming the country.

**-A difficult task taking into account the specific nature of the conflict in this country, what are your projections, and in what manner is work being carried out to disarm the country<sup>7</sup>?**

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Having tabulated 90% of the ballots, the candidate of L'Espwa had obtained 49% of the votes. A few days after the polls, and after the discovery of blank ballots in trash heaps around the capital, and in order to avoid accusations of fraud; the manner in which votes were tabulated was adjusted. In this manner, the Provisional Electoral Council announced that Préval had obtained 51.5% of the ballots, after tabulating 96% of the votes. The UN admitted that this was a "political solution", in the name of the country's stability. The Christian-Democrat candidate Lesly Manigat (also a former President), who had obtained the second most votes, described the decision as an "electoral coup d'Etat"; thought he finally recognized Préval's victory.

<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that in Haiti, 170,000 small arms are in the hands of the former military and criminal gangs in a country with around 8 million inhabitants, according to a report by Amnesty International entitled "Haiti: Delayed Disarmament, Justice Denied" (July 2005). The organization requested that MINUSTAH should immediately implement a broad reaching disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program. For further information, see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR360052005>.

The Escola de Cultura de Pau (ECP), which quotes from the document, Weapons Under Control Campaign, provides further statistics, and estimates that around 210,000 weapons circulate illegally in Haiti, of which 170,000 are in the

A.- Disarmament cannot be negotiated in Haiti, as we are dealing with criminal groups which, without their weapons would not be able to pursue their occupation. Therefore, it is a more complex situation than if we were dealing with guerrillas of irregular armies. At the moment, the presence of Préval in Government, his popularity, and the fact that his support stems from the poorest segments of the population, gives us some hope that we are before a real possibility of advancing in a disarmament process. It is also necessary that the United States, and some Caribbean countries impose stricter controls on the sale of weapons to Haiti, as little will be achieved if we disarm people who three weeks later will receive a shipment of weapons from Florida, that will be put in the hands of criminals. This is the great task before us, although it must be stressed that Haiti's problem is neither a military nor a security one, but a problem of development, and therefore, if an ambitious development program is not launched to help Préval's government a crucial opportunity will be lost, and what we have so far achieved can rapidly be eroded.



- One of the critical issues in this sense is the weakness - or total lack- of a Haitian State.

A.- We must reconstruct institutions, starting with the police and the judicial system, which are the two basic functions of the State, and this will allow for the development of other institutions. I would say, that in this period, it is clear that the Haitian State developed its negotiating capacity in the international sphere, as

concerns its economy and finances; the Ministry of Finance exists, is well endowed, and benefits from the work of qualified personnel, and this is a crucial factor. But, much more is needed, as without a credible justice system there can be no State, and this precisely what is lacking.

-This means more and better MINUSTAH for Haiti?

A.- We must stay because we need to help the incoming president to maintain internal peace while the Government and Parliament -new democratic bodies- slowly regenerate the institutional process. Similarly, from a technical perspective our Mission must help in the establishment of these bodies.

## TROOP WITHDRAWAL

-Many tasks, many challenges. What do you think of the decision taken by the Spanish government to withdraw its troops from Haiti<sup>8</sup>?

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hands of individuals and security forces, while 13,000 would be in the hands of armed criminal groups. For further information, see: <http://www.pangea.org/unescopau/img/programas/alerta/haiti/haiti012.pdf>

8 On the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, a day after the elections, the Spanish Minister of Defense, José Bono, ordered the withdrawal of the 200 Spanish Navy Marines, in Haiti since the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2004, together with 150 Moroccan soldiers under its command. These troops have performed security and stabilization tasks in Haiti, in the Department of the Northwest, the poorest in the nation, next to the border with the Dominican Republic, a difficult area given the illegal migratory flows and the smuggling of weapons and illicit drugs. The Department's capital, Fort Liberté, hosted the Miguel de Cervantes Base. The UN requested, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, that Spain reconsider its decision to

A.- I have had a very positive conversation with the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miguel Angel Moratinos, to whom I have thanked for the Spanish support to the Mission, and I have also had conversations with the Secretary-General of Defense Policy, Admiral Francisco Torrente, as Minister Bono was absent. We talked about the situation of the troops, and I would like to say that the main thing is that Spain continues taking part in the Mission and will participate not only with the presence of military personnel, but also, and very probably, with a change towards police personnel. But they still have to consider what I have asked them: that the withdrawal of troops take place only after the electoral process reaches its end, and not before.

**- But sooner than later, there will be a withdrawal of Spanish troops, which as you mentioned are very important for the island.**

A.- I understand that this is the Government's decision, and I have nothing to say on that matter. What worries us is the moment, rather than the decision in itself. It would be difficult for us if the withdrawal takes place before the end of the electoral process. Unfortunately, this process has been delayed, but that is the way things go in countries such as Haiti.

**- You have stated your agreement with Préval as to the need for Haiti to continue with the military presence of MINUSTAH (7,000 soldiers) for another two or three years. In such a context, wouldn't you say that the Spanish decision to withdraw its troops is unfortunate?**

A.- We would clearly prefer that the Spanish contingent remain in place, but we understand that the Government may have very valid reasons to decide otherwise. We respect this decision and we are very grateful that the Spanish Executive has reiterated its commitment, and seeks other forms of participation in the Mission which we will consider with great interest. The Spanish participation has been very important, it has helped to calm down one of Haiti's most complex areas, that of the border with the Dominican Republic. This is a very delicate area, and the Spanish Marine contingent has done a great job. I also must thank the presence of the Spanish Civil Guard which has been critical for the development of the international police in the capital.

**- You have just come back from Santiago de Chile at a moment of intense internal debate, sponsored by the opposition parties as to the convenience of maintaining Chilean troops in Haiti beyond the month of July<sup>9</sup>. What do you think about a possible withdrawal of South American troops from MINUSTAH?**

A.- The Chilean Congress will take a decision in July. There has been a debate over the last weeks, which in any case is almost a tradition during the summer months in Santiago, when there is no relevant news, but president Ricardo Lagos (now the former president) has been very clear in stating that the troops will remain, and that there is a long-term commitment, acquired together with Argentina, Uruguay and other countries from the Southern Cone of South America. In my own, personal, opinion, the Chilean troops should remain at least for another two or three years. To be fair, it makes no sense to rescue a drowning person from a river, to leave him/her with both hands on a rock tell him/her to change clothes and wish him/her "all the best". I would consider this a serious mistake.

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withdraw its troops, integrated within the UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti (MINUSTAH), but the decision now seems irrevocable. The Spanish forces are to be replaced by Uruguayan troops. The head of the Mission is to be Arturo Merello.

<sup>9</sup> The Chilean right-wing parties, prior to the instauration of Michelle Bachelet, questioned the extension of the Chilean troops stay in MINUSTAH, beyond the 31<sup>st</sup> of July. They called for the return of the 578 soldiers, integrated in multinational forces, since June 2004. The final decision is in the hands of the new Government that was sworn into office on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March and the Chilean Parliament must decide in the first semester of the current year.

- In practice, do you believe in the concept of a contingent of South American armies aimed at solving the region's specific problems? A military, stabilizing force from and for the continent?<sup>10</sup>

A.- This is something that had never happened since the Independence of America. A lasting military association which operates in a combined manner, in which officers from different countries of America and Spain work together, it is a totally new phenomenon, and I believe it will set a precedent. It is an incredibly interesting development.

- Is this a formula that can therefore be extrapolated? An example to be followed?

A.- I believe it to be very interesting. I consider that our countries' armed forces are important factors of regional integration. I see that they have performed a task of regional integration, often far more important than what has been done by the respective Governments, without meaning any disrespect, and this is my own personal opinion, I am not talking in name of the United Nations, but as myself. Therefore, yes. I do believe that it is very important that the armed forces of the countries of the South continue to work together. And, I do believe that this experience is going to prove to be invaluable in this process.

#### **THE NECESSARY FINANCIAL AID**

- There are rumors of frustration among the troops due to delays or the lack of consistency in the financial aid. What has happened to the 1,250 million US Dollars that the International Community had committed to for Haiti?

A.- According to the World Bank over 700 million US Dollars (of the 1,250 million) have been spent in Haiti, over the last two years. Having said this, it is clear that this money has not yet been invested, in the sense that the result of the investment has yet to be visible. What we do know is that there are projects, for this value, that are ready to start. This is clearly positive, but we need to seriously reconsider where this money is going. We know that there are roads being built, credit lines for local administrations and for the support of Haitian institutions, and we also know that 66 million US Dollars have been spent on the elections, but more time is clearly needed. I believe that the international community's assistance towards Haiti must be focused on a plan for the government of Haiti. I think that the idea that each donor chooses the sector in which to place funds, in a relatively unstructured manner, has already reached the end of its cycle, and that it must be improved. What we should have is a plan, but sadly, there are some institutions that do not like to participate collectively in such plans.

**Is this something that is being worked on?**

A.- Yes. We recently held a meeting at the World Bank, in Washington; and another meeting is programmed to be held in Port-au-Prince, and in April a meeting will be held among Ministers to debate financial aid for Haiti. We are working on it.

**Ambassador, do you believe that democracy in Haiti is viable?**

A.- Firstly, I believe that Haiti, as a country, is viable, and so too that democracy is viable in this country. I also believe that a huge effort must still be made to put its institutions in working order, and avoid their progressive disarticulation, which is what has been happening to date. It is also clear that Haiti has no other alternative beyond a democratic government, not only because it is the best alternative, and

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<sup>10</sup> MINUSTAH includes forces from over twenty countries, of which nearly half are South American. Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Ecuador among others. Brazil, whose contingent represents one sixth of the total, is responsible for the implementation of the mandate.

because the people want it, but also because it is too close to the United States, therefore a dictatorship will never succeed -considering the amount of international aid that the country requires. Without this aid, it is very difficult to envisage that Haiti will be able to recover, and in order to obtain this aid it requires a democratic regime, and in this, I see no difficulties.

**Do you not fear Aristide's specter<sup>11</sup>?**

R.- I believe that Haitians look to the future and not to the past. It is all I will say: that they want to move forward with René Préval.

Madrid, 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2006

#### A DIPLOMAT DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

Juan Gabriel Valdés is a Doctor in Political Science from the University of Princeton, United States. During the Government of Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) he was appointed Ambassador to Spain. In 1999, under the presidency of Eduardo Frei Ruiz Tagle, he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. His period in office was marked by the arrest in London of the former dictator Augusto Pinochet. During Ricardo Lagos' government he was posted as Permanent Ambassador before the United Nations, until May 2003, following the decision taken by the Executive to not support an immediate attack against Iraq by the US. That same year he was appointed Chilean Ambassador before the Republic of Argentina.

Mid-August 2004, he accepted the United Nations' Secretary-General, Kofi Annan's designation. He expressed his pride and "honor" at the designation, and on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2004 he became the head of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, a task that he described as "extremely difficult". He had to deal with the precedent of previous United Nations sponsored attempts to bring peace to the island over the last decade. The UN's involvement in Haiti began in February 1993 when it deployed the joint United Nations and Organization of American States operation in Haiti, and in September 1993, the United Nations Security Council established its first peace-keeping operation in the country: the United Nations Mission in Haiti (UNMIH).

With the deployment of MINUSTAH (currently 9,000 strong, between soldiers and police forces), Valdés was tackling a "multifaceted" task that incorporated the establishment of security in the country -as the main priority- as well as political and humanitarian tasks, which have been the source of numerous criticisms.

His mandate could extend until the end of Kofi Annan's second mandate, but Gabriel Valdés has already announced his retirement, at a non-disclosed date, in the near future.

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11 On the 21<sup>st</sup> of February, Aristide himself declared, from South Africa, his intention to return to Haiti, as soon as possible. The elected president has reiterated that his predecessor, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, can return freely to Haiti, having been expelled by US and Haitian soldiers on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2004. Préval has said, "my position is simple, Article 41.1 of the Constitution states that no Haitian requires a visa to leave or enter his country".