

U.S. church official says Haiti desperately needs political stability

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti – Haiti desperately needs political stability so that jobs can be created to lift the poor out of a critical situation, said the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy.

"The situation is critical, although there is still a glimmer of hope," Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., told Catholic News Service July 16. "Haiti now needs a solid success story so that hope does not disappear."

Bishop Wenski, who visited Haiti in mid-July, said that in a private meeting earlier that day, Haitian President Rene Preval expressed his thanks for the work of the Catholic Church in advocating for the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity Through Partnership Encouragement Act and for the job opportunities it could create.

The U.S. Hope Act I and II, as it is known, allows the United States to import Haitian textiles and could create 3,000 jobs in Haiti where, the bishop said, it is estimated that every job feeds an extended family of 10 people, so "3,000 jobs could feed 300,000 people."

"But the president (Preval) recognized that the ball is now in Haitians' court, and they must resolve the current political crisis if they are to be able to take advantage of the new legislation," Bishop Wenski said; without political stability, investors will not confidently invest their money into a job-producing market in Haiti.

Riots linked to the food crisis brought down Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis in April after a no-confidence vote by the opposition.

Two candidates already proposed as replacements by Preval, following the procedure set out in the Haitian Constitution, have been refused by the parliament, allegedly for motives related to political squabbles rather than any substantial issues.

In June Preval nominated a third person, Michele Duvivier Pierre-Louis, director of a

local nongovernmental organization and once active in the church's Mission Alpha, which provided literacy training for Haiti's poor and was repressed severely by the Duvalier dynasty in the 1980s. However, Pierre-Louis has come under attack from detractors, including the Haitian Protestant Federation, who allege that she is a lesbian and should therefore not be allowed to become prime minister.

"Politicians need to put aside their partisan interests and prioritize having a functioning government," Bishop Wenski said.

After a three-month political vacuum, Haiti desperately needs political stability in order to be able to tackle the crises that are perpetuating hunger and poverty, Bishop Wenski said.

He said that although the effects of the recent food crisis are no longer very apparent and food is available, many Haitians still cannot afford to buy the food they need to feed themselves and their families. The U.S. government sent \$40 million in emergency aid to allow the purchase of food, but this was just a short-term measure, he said: People need to be able to ensure a more reliable and regular food supply over the longer term.

"In order for people to have increased purchasing power, they need more jobs. And to have more jobs, we need to see a basic political framework which would allow the private sector to operate," Bishop Wenski said.

The bishop referred to the 1 million Haitians in the United States who participate in American life and in the churches.

"There is a great deal of good will toward Haiti in the U.S., and that is a very positive element. We wish to take advantage of this good will and ensure that Americans don't forget Haiti," he said.

But, he warned, a success story is important now, if the country is not to sink deeper into despair.

"Haiti needs to turn the page of its difficult past and work toward building a future of hope," he said.