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Governing in Haiti's Disaster Zone

Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive Juggles Demands of Quake Relief Effort, While Trying to Make His Efforts Visible

By DAVID GAUTHIER-VILLARS

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti—Jean-Max Bellerive, Haiti's 52-year-old prime minister, started his 15-hour business day Thursday after getting up from his tent outside his damaged official residence. Scores of homeless families also have been camping out on the grounds since the earthquake three weeks ago.

Among the orders of business at a makeshift office in a run-down police building: He tackled a range of requests from foreign governments organizing aid, strategized on how to find places for his ministers to work, met with the head of UNICEF, fielded dozens of phone calls, had his hair cut ahead of an interview with CNN's Larry King, and smoked through a pack of Benson & Hedges longs.

"If I must, I guess I can go and meet Bill Clinton at the airport," the prime minister said to an aide shortly after 3 p.m., exasperated. "What is he coming here for, again?"

"I am not sure, PM," said the aide, Jean-Robert Simonise. Mr. Clinton was to arrive Friday. Mr. Bellerive resumed his conversation with a Haitian-American consultant over rebuilding issues.

Mr. Bellerive's day, which he spent shadowed by a reporter, showed the government of Haiti struggling to cope with a massive foreign presence while juggling a host of emergencies and long-term development plans. Its leaders appeared eager to avoid missteps of the past, when Haiti squandered \$5 billion in foreign aid through mismanagement, bureaucracy and corruption.

They also were under pressure to make their presence felt, after criticism in the early days after the quake that they were too invisible as casualties mounted and aid was slow to reach the needy. The government says at least 200,000 are dead and it faces a massive project to quickly house its homeless and in the longer term, rebuild its society.

"We must act quickly to put forward our own vision for Haiti, or else foreigners will impose their own," Mr. Bellerive said during a cabinet meeting, held every other day at the central bureau of Haiti's judicial police near the international airport.

He headed there in a bullet-proof white Land Cruiser at 7:30 a.m. after being paid his wages for the first time since the quake along with some of Haiti's other 60,000 civil servants. Mr. Bellerive received 109,728 gourdes, or about \$2,500, for the month.

At the meeting, ministers explained what they had done to find new locations for their offices. Mr. Bellerive urged them to consider buildings that have been impounded in recent drug cases to avoid rushing to rent expensive places. In Haiti, the president runs the country and the premier implements his policies. In this case, it appears as though the president entrusts much of the state's most important tasks to Mr. Bellerive.

When it was Tourism Minister Patrick Delatour's turn to speak, the ministers laughed. Opposition politicians have called for his resignation, arguing that Haiti has more urgent priorities than its hotels. But Mr. Delatour now has new responsibilities: coordinating the effort to relocate ministries. "So, I still have a future in this government, right PM,?" Mr. Delatour asked.

"Yes, I want a final plan by Friday evening," Mr. Bellerive said as the sound of a helicopter masked his voice. "Besides, you've all heard the radio?"

He was referring to comments in recent days on Haiti's airwaves that there is a political vacuum in the country. He said it was inevitable that when people get food from foreign relief organizations, they don't note whether the Haitian government helped restore the fuel supply for the trucks. "We must find ways to reach out to the population," said Mr. Bellerive.

The government is operating in almost war-like conditions, and under emotional strain. Nearly every minister either lost loved ones or employees in the quake. The Finance Minister lost a son, whom he pulled from the rubble; Mr. Delatour's parents both died.

After the cabinet meeting Mr. Bellerive hosted a meeting with business leaders, telling them he wanted to talk about how the private sector could

help the government design a master plan for rebuilding Haiti. He said there were several scenarios being floated by the United Nations, the World Bank and other international agencies on how to make reconstruction aid available to the island. Businessmen said they felt ill-prepared to help because they had no idea that reconstruction would be the topic of the meeting.

Others urged the government to move back to a central location in Port-au-Prince, saying it would be an important symbol of sovereignty.

As they left the room, the Premier took a laptop from his Tumi leather bag and began working on a two-page document explaining how Haiti would like to play a leading role in rebuilding itself.

Aides kept interrupting him. One brought a bilateral convention from Spain seeking to provide legal basis for having its soldiers in Haiti. Another aide brought a stack of adoption documents from Italian parents wanting to adopt Haitian children. Since the earthquake, Haiti has agreed to process adoptions only if they were near completion and provided government of recipient families take responsibility for any problem.

Mr. Bellerive handed the documents back, saying the Italian embassy had to vouch for the adopting families. "I have never seen so many parents wanting to adopt their Haitian kids," he said.

Mr. Bellerive was trying to return to his reconstruction draft when the acting speaker of the Haitian Senate, Michel Clerié, came to him. "We need to talk," he said. "Senators are concerned with the numbers of foreign troops present on our soil." The prime minister said he had no patience for such debate: "Foreign troops are here to help us."

The prime minister moved to a small, bare room to meet with Ann Veneman, executive director of the U.N. Children's Fund. The UNICEF chief said the recent case of ten U.S. missionaries being charged with abducting 33 children might be "a blessing" because it would help "raise the issue of potential child trafficking."

Mr. Bellerive said he agreed, but added that he was upset that journalists would only ask him about the ten missionaries when he had to deal with millions of homeless.

It was close to 2 pm. The blue office didn't remain empty very long. Someone brought a ham-and-cheese sandwich. Mr. Bellerive inquired about progress made on a plan to relocate the 672 families who tent in the garden of his residence. Although it was a good symbol of solidarity among Haitians, the makeshift tents would give a poor image of the government if they remained pitched here too long.

An aide, Mario Bondésir, said he had found an alternative site for about half of the families but was still working on a complete solution. "Make it happen Mario," Mr. Bellerive said. "You have a week."

Haiti diaspora minister Edwin Paraison came to say it would be good to plan a trip to Miami, New York and Boston to thank Haitians living in the U.S. for their financial support. Construction Minister Jacques Gabriel came to talk about budget issues.

Suddenly, A bit later, Mr. Bellerive put his hand on the wall. "Did you feel the aftershock?" The barely perceptible vibration gave people present in the room a feeling of dizziness, like when a cruise ship reaches pier.

Mr. Bellerive recalled the day of the earthquake. He was at a meeting about combating AIDS. "My car couldn't move because of the debris," he said. "I had to jump on a motorcycle to reach President Préval."

Joseph Jasmin, minister in charge of relations between the government and Parliament, came for the second time in the day to plead his case: Mr. Bellerive, he argued, should meet with lawmakers to discuss the relief effort and reconstruction plans.

The prime minister, however, said it was difficult to organize such a meeting because the lower house is in extraordinary session — elections due this month have been postponed indefinitely—and its powers aren't very clear.

Mr. Bellerive said that beyond the legal tussle, he was irked by remarks by some opposition politicians who criticize the government's response to the earthquake.

"Even if we do our best, it will always come short of expectations," Mr. Bellerive said. "There is so much misery around us."

"Talk to them, Mr. Jasmin said. "There is no harm in talking."

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