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No more food aid, Haitian leader urges

By Marc Burleigh (AFP) – Mar 8, 2010

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PORT-AU-PRINCE — International food aid to Haiti has to be scaled back so the quake-ravaged nation can find its feet through its own domestic production and employment, President Rene Preval said Monday.

Preval told reporters he would make that point to US President Barack Obama when the two hold talks in the White House on Wednesday.

He also said Haiti's priorities now were to prepare for the coming hurricane season, which starts in June, and to get children back to school.

Preval made the statements at a joint media conference with visiting Canadian Governor General Michaëlle Jean -- who was born in Haiti -- in a tent in front of his shattered presidential palace.

After speaking, he flew to Washington where he was to meet various US lawmakers and officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, before seeing Obama on Wednesday.

Asked what he planned to tell Obama, Preval said: "First of all, thank you, for the aid that was spontaneously given by all the international community and by the United States in particular."

But he would also explain that now that the "first phase of the emergency is over," Haitians needed to be weaned off some of the assistance and contribute to their own needs.

"If food and water continues to be sent from abroad, that will undermine Haitian national production and Haitian trade," Preval said.

"Now we have to move more and more towards creating jobs so people are paid, and so they themselves step in to help Haiti."

Preparations for the hurricane season also have to be given priority, given the 1.3 million people left homeless from the January 12 quake that killed more than 220,000 people, Preval said.

"Unfortunately, the finances aren't there. We are lacking 38 million dollars," he said.

The resumption of classes was necessary for the 600,000 children currently not going to school, he added, explaining it could also serve as a "trigger" in starting to thin out the crowded camps and sending people to settlements outside the capital.

Those points were being stressed by the Haitian government in the lead-up to an international donors' conference to take place in the United Nations in New York on March 31.

Government experts, aid groups and Haiti's government are to reconcile their visions of how to rebuild Haiti next week with the goal of submitting a clear plan for donors at the UN conference.

The World Food Program, responding to concerns about the effect the massive inflow of food aid was having on Haiti's economy, said many Haitians did not have the money, post-quake, to buy food in the country's struggling markets.

"The fact is that a lot of these people who are receiving the food assistance here today would not be able to buy the products in the market at market prices," which have in many cases tripled since the quake, WFP spokeswoman Silke Buhr told AFP on the weekend.

Buhr was speaking as her organization launched a new food "surge" meant to feed 1.9 million of Haiti's 10 million inhabitants over the next month.

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Rene Preval welcoming Michaëlle Jean (R) in Port-au-Prince

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