

 [Click to Print](#)

[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

[ajc.com](#) > [nation/world](#)

Florida neighbors will miss Haiti's new prime minister

By GARIOT LOUIMA and ELIOT KLEINBERG
Cox News Service
Published on: 03/10/04

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- People familiar with Gerard Latortue call him the rassembleur, a well-respected diplomat who can assemble groups at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and bring them to a common ground.

The suburban Boca Raton, Fla., resident flew Wednesday from Miami to Port-au-Prince to become Haiti's new prime minister. A former Haitian foreign minister, economist and television show host, his ability to build bridges will be important as he works with interim president Boniface Alexandre to rebuild the strife-torn nation.

"We are going in the spirit to reconcile the country and bring security and development and cooperation with the international community," said Latortue, 69, who has lived with his wife, Marlene, in a gated community west of Boca Raton for 10 years. "We hope, with the installment of the new government, we will put an end to the violence."

With Alexandre, Latortue will lead a transitional government that will pave the way to national elections. That government, working with international peacekeepers, must first bring stability to a country still reeling from a monthlong rebellion.

Latortue will manage the day-to-day workings of the Haitian government while Alexandre serves as a ceremonial head of state.

A U.S.-led "council of sages" announced his appointment at 4:30 p.m. EST Tuesday. Other finalists were Smarck Michel, who served briefly as former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's foreign minister, and Herard Abraham, a former army general.

Latortue has said he would like Abraham, whom he called "one of the best Haitians," to serve in his cabinet as minister of defense.

Dressed in a dark suit and carrying a briefcase, Latortue emerged Wednesday about noon from his peach-colored home in the Boca Isles community.

"I know I'm going into a very different situation," he said. "We need only the good will and the protection of God. We'll succeed because we are on the right path. We can not leave Haiti. If there's a risk, I'm just taking it."

Latortue said the international peacekeeping force now assembling in Haiti "will help us save Haiti from the disaster."

He urged Haitians not to try to leave for America.

Before boarding an afternoon flight at Miami International Airport, Latortue told reporters he plans to meet with Guy Philippe, the leader of the rebellion that consumed half the country and sparked the resignation of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

"I will speak to him the way I will speak to others," he said. "He is one of the ones who helped bring democracy back to Haiti."

He dismissed Aristide as "a thing of the past as far as I am concerned" and accused the exiled leader of lying to the people and mismanaging Haiti.

Haitian-American community leaders and local activists said Wednesday they were happy with the council's selection.

Philippe "Bob" Louis Jeune, director of the Haitian Citizens United Task Force, said Latortue is widely respected among Haitian-Americans because he's nonpartisan.

"For me, he's the guy that we need right now. He doesn't take a side on things. He's honest," Jeune said. "We don't need people (in government) who will divide the Haitian people. We need someone who can come in the middle and make everyone understand."

Daniella Henry, executive director of the Haitian American Community Council in Delray Beach, Fla., said Latortue has the formidable task of appealing to Haiti's poor, who once overwhelmingly supported Aristide — whom Latortue publicly opposed.

"I hope he applies all of his experience for the benefit of the Haitian people," Henry said. "What he needs to do is get everyone together. If people are still fighting, there is no way you can complete anything. His first priority should be to bring unity."

But disarming the armed gangs outside of the capital might be Latortue's most difficult task, some observers said.

"Whether they are for the opposition or for Lavalas (Aristide's political party), as long as you have armed bandits and gangs who are able to kill, then I don't think you will be able to have a peaceful accord," said Jean-Robert Lafortune, president of the Haitian American Grassroots Coalition.

Even while living a private, suburban life, Latortue has put his mediation skills to good use, said his friend Lesly Jacques, manager of Haiti Amerique Internationale of Boca Raton.

In March 2001, after Jacques fired a well-known journalist from WHSR 980 AM, community leaders decried the firing as politically motivated and picketed Jacques' Boca Raton station on several occasions. The protests ended when Latortue intervened, Jacques said.

Jacques said Latortue "was the only one who could come in and fix the problem in the community" because he was the only person who commanded the respect of everyone involved.

"Haiti is a sick country," Jacques said. "We need a rassembleur, someone who is able to get everyone together at the same table."

Latortue's friends say his strong personality fits the task at hand.

"He's Christian, a man who believes in principles," said Winnie Edugene Robbin, 48, of Boca Raton. "He likes people, no matter what you might be."

Latortue and Robbin are members of a Haitian American social group in Boca Raton. At club gatherings, Latortue is often the center of attention, Robbin said.

"Everyone sits around him because he has charisma," she said. "People just seem to gather around him. You find yourself sitting next to him and you don't know how you got there but you listen to every word."

Latortue was born in Gonaives, Haiti's fourth largest city. He studied politics and economics in Paris and returned to Haiti as a lawyer and law professor. In 1961, he co-founded the Institute of Economics and Business Study, but two years later, he fled the country during the dictatorship of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

Eventually, Latortue joined the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, where he served as chief negotiator in Vienna.

He returned to Haiti in 1998 and joined the government of Leslie Francois Manigat, only to flee again when Manigat's government was overthrown by a military coup d'etat.

Last year, Latortue joined with the creators of the country's first Haitian and Creole-language television network, hosting two talk shows.

"He's not afraid to talk and to speak his mind," said Elizabeth Guerin, program director at the Haitian Television Network in Miami. "He knows how to talk to people because he's a teacher. He's the kind of guy that we need in Haiti as the president or the prime minister."

As he left for the airport Wednesday, Latortue stopped to shake hands with neighbor Chris Connelly.

"Congratulations," said Connelly, a retired businessman who has lived across the street for 10 years.

"This man is going to do a great job," he later said, adding that the new prime minister is "just a charming man."

Boca Isles security guard Joe Ferrante said he was proud of Latortue.

"He's very well respected," Ferrante said. "He's one wonderful person. It's a tough job. He said, 'Joe, I'm going to come back now and then and see you to say hello.'"

Find this article at:

<http://www.ajc.com/news/content/news/0304/11haitifla.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.