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## **S. Florida TV host named premier of Haiti**

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PORT-AU-PRINCE -- A former Haitian foreign minister and popular South Florida television talk-show host was selected Tuesday to become Haiti's next prime minister.

Gerard Latortue, a critic of exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was chosen after two days of painstaking deliberations by a U.S.-backed "council of sages" to fill the power vacuum created Feb. 29 when Aristide resigned. Latortue will lead a transitional government that will pave the way for presidential elections early next year.

"I am very excited to be able to do something for my country to bring together all Haitians," Latortue said in a telephone interview with The Herald. "It is time for us to forget our differences and come together for the country in this bicentennial year."

Latortue, 69, was one of three finalists for prime minister nominated by a council charged with replacing the government of the exiled Aristide. The council grilled Latortue by telephone for 2 ½ hours Monday afternoon as he sat in his Boca Raton home.

"I can facilitate the national reconciliation," Latortue said. "It is the most important thing today in Haiti after all the divisions we had in Aristide."

Council members announced their decision at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday. No one notified Latortue directly that the job was his.

"The interview is really what brought most [of the council members] to his side," said Claude Mancuso, a close friend, "because he was able to give them a vision of what was to be done."

### **TOUGH CHOICE TO MAKE**

The decision-making confounded the seven members on the council, who had to decide whether Haiti needed someone with a business or military background, or someone who represented a new beginning.

"If it is a new beginning for Haiti, then we need to have some new people," said Ariel Henry, one of the council members.

The other finalists were Herard Abraham, a former army general who lives in Miami Shores and oversaw Aristide's first election into office, and Smarck Michel, who served briefly as Aristide's prime minister.

Latortue said he would like Abraham, a friend, to serve in his Cabinet as minister of security and defense. He added that he plans to ask Michel to serve as either minister of planning or finance.

The council's recommendation must be formally presented to interim President Boniface Alexandre. As prime minister, Latortue will manage the day-to-day workings of the government while Alexandre fills the more ceremonial head of state role.

Born in 1934 in the Haitian city of Gonaives, Latortue studied economics and politics in Paris and returned to Haiti as a lawyer and law school professor. He co-founded the Institute of Economics and Business Study in Port-au-Prince with a friend in 1961, because "nowhere in Haiti was there an institution where Haitians could study economics and business," Latortue said.

He fled the Duvalier regime in 1963, went to Jamaica, then Washington, then to Puerto Rico as an economics teacher on a Fulbright scholarship. Then he joined the United Nations Organization for Industrial Development, eventually rising to chief negotiator and working in Vienna.

Latortue returned to Haiti again in 1988 to join the government of Leslie Manigat as foreign minister, only to flee again when the army staged a coup four months later. He returned to the United Nations.

Latortue moved to South Florida in July 1994. Aristide offered him a job in his Cabinet in 2001, Latortue told The Herald, but he turned it down.

### **RISING VOICE**

Over the past year, Latortue had become a prominent voice among Haitians in South Florida. He debuted on the air in March 2003 with the launch of the Haitian Television Network of America, or HTN.

One of Latortue's shows, *Revue de la Semaine*, was a political round table on Haiti, "a sort of Capital Gang," Mancuso said. The other, *L'inviter*, is "like Larry King," Latortue said, featuring weekly guests in a one-on-one interview format.

"He didn't use it as a platform to attack [Aristide], but to present objectively what was going on, what was wrong with the situation," Mancuso said.

Latortue is married, with three adult daughters. One is a professor of history in New York, another works for the International Monetary Fund in Washington, and the third works at the World Bank in Paris.

Latortue's selection drew mixed reviews in South Florida.

Jean-Robert LaFortune, of the Haitian American Grassroots Coalition, said Latortue may not be the best choice to restore peace to Haiti.

"Mr. Latortue is more of a technocrat," LaFortune said. ``At this time, there is a hemorrhage. You must stop the hemorrhage first before you can start the focus on moving forward."

But Gepsie Metellus, a Haitian-American activist, said Latortue would rise to the challenge of one of the toughest jobs in the Western Hemisphere.

"I don't think he's the kind of person who can be eaten up and chewed out," Metellus said. ``He's ready."

Herald staff writers Joe Mozingo and Hannah Sampson contributed to this report.