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Throngs welcome Aristide to Haiti

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Mar. 18, 2011

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Amid blaring horns and cheering crowds, former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide returned to his native Haiti March 18.

The exiled leader touched down about 9:20 a.m. at Toussaint Louverture International Airport, and his arrival sent the crowds that had gathered throughout the morning into joyous cheering and flag-waving.

Under heavy security, parading groups of people circled the airport grounds, shouting their support and displaying fliers with Aristide's image and the message "Bon Retour" ("Good return"). U.N. troops and the Haitian National Police were stationed at numerous locations.

Other supporters of the ousted former leader drove on roads near the airport, handing out fliers and flags and shouting.

About 100 men crowded into the rental car office to watch the landing on live television. They cheered wildly when they saw Aristide as he exited his chartered plane after an overnight flight.

He returned two days before Haitians were to go to the polls in a vote for president, and his return could be seen as a challenge to the Haitian government.

Voters will choose from former first lady Mirlande Manigat and festival singer Michel "Sweet Mickey" Martelly. They were deemed the top two finishers in the first round of voting Nov. 28. The controversy over who would be in the runoff led to riots and a two-month delay in the poll.

Aristide, a laicized Catholic priest, remains popular among Haiti's poorest residents. He was the country's first democratically elected president, taking office in 1991, but was forced out in a coup eight months later. He returned to office in 1994 after the United States negotiated his return.

He was elected to a second term in 2001. His populist slogans appealed to the masses, but the promise of a better life for a majority of Haitians living in urban slums and rural shanties never materialized under his administration. Critics have said his comments divided the country along class lines.

He was ousted in a rebellion in February 2004 and was whisked out of the country in a move coordinated by Western governments. He eventually ended up in South Africa.

Reports that his charted plane had left South Africa sent people parading into the streets of the Haitian capital. At a refueling stop in Dakar, Senegal, late March 17, he told reporters that he wanted to work on education issues once he settled back into his homeland, the Associated Press reported.

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