

Haiti's status up to Ottawa, Bourassa says

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QUEBEC — Premier Robert Bourassa last night sidestepped the issue of Haiti's status at the Paris summit of francophone nations Feb. 17.

While Bourassa acknowledged that Quebec's large Haitian community is concerned about the dictatorship of self-proclaimed President-for-life Jean-Claude Duvalier, he said it is up to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to decide whether to take a stand.

Bourassa said external relations do not fall under provincial jurisdiction.

An aide to Bourassa said he was not sure Duvalier would attend the three-day conference.

The issue of Haiti's status at the 35-nation summit was raised in light of reports of violence and death in week-long demonstrations against the Duvalier family.

Bourassa made the comment to reporters before addressing a dinner for about 16 diplomats attending a pre-summit planning session here yesterday.

Bourassa said Quebec wants to develop close economic and cultural links with French countries around the world.

"Quebec has always been and is still the cornerstone of the French fact in Canada," Bourassa said.

He said the summit provides French nations with a unique opportunity to build a worldwide community that is "both profitable and generous."

"We have the historic chance to build an original community, to invent together part of our future."

The summit is the first such meeting of francophone nations. Earlier attempts to hold international francophone summits were stalled by a disagreement between Quebec and Ottawa over Quebec's status at the summit.

An agreement last fall means that Quebec and New Brunswick, where francophones make up a third of the population, will sit at the summit table alongside Ottawa.

Ottawa's delegation will include a representative from the Fédération des francophones hors Québec.