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HAITI

The Honourable Monique Vézina, Minister for External Relations today released the following statement on developments in Haiti:

"For many years, Canadians have followed the situation of the Haitian people with profound sympathy and concern. Witnessing Haiti's social and economic decline, we have tried to help relieve the hardships faced by the most disadvantaged of its people, and to assist in meeting some of the urgent needs they face. We have done so by supporting the work of organizations such as Le Cardinal Léger et ses oeuvres, Développement et Paix and the Foster Parent Plan of Canada. Our concern for the respect of human rights and for the well-being of the population has dominated our approach to Haiti and determined the tone and content of our relations with its government.

Today, Haiti begins a new era. A provisional government has replaced the administration of Jean-Claude Duvalier. The Haitian people hope for a new and better future. All Canadians, I know, share that hope and wish them well. We look forward to the eventual establishment of democracy and to a government committed to the protection of the rights and freedoms of its citizens.

A new beginning brings with it opportunities and also great challenges. The Government of Canada is aware of the difficulties and of the special needs that the new Government of Haiti faces as it begins its difficult task. We pledge to maintain our commitment to the improvement of the lives of the Haitian people, and are ready to make a significant effort to assist in meeting the urgent needs that Haiti now faces.

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Canadians now in Haiti have a particular place in our thoughts today. Many are there to assist the people of Haiti to build a better future. We are concerned for them and we will ensure that any steps that may become necessary are taken to ensure their well-being. There are Canadian naval vessels currently exercising in the general area. Two of them have been instructed to move closer to Haiti in case they should be needed for purposes of evacuation. However, at the present time, there is no perceived need and this is simply a contingency measure. Our Embassy in Haiti is in close contact with the Canadian community and will keep us informed."