UN urges generosity at Haiti donors conference

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By Patrick Worsnip

UNITED NATIONS, USA (Reuters): The United Nations pressed rich nations on Monday to aid impoverished Haiti at a donor conference next week, and won a pledge from the United States that it would be generous.

The Caribbean state is the western Hemisphere's poorest nation, but UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon believes it is poised to grow rapidly if it makes internal reforms and receives help from the outside world.

In a letter last week to donor countries, released by the United Nations on Monday, Ban said the April 14 Inter-American Development Bank conference in Washington was of "fundamental importance for consolidating the fragile stability of Haiti."

"I wish to enlist your assistance in making a special effort to support Haiti through renewed technical and financial engagement so that Haiti is firmly on the path to lasting stability and sustainable development," he added.

Ban, who visited Haiti last month along with former US President Bill Clinton, appealed for high-level attendance at the conference.

In a report to the Security Council on Monday, UN envoy to Haiti Hedi Annabi said international assistance was vital for Haiti to build up its infrastructure and meet a $125 million requirement for budget support in this fiscal year.

US Ambassador Susan Rice told the council Washington was encouraged by progress Haiti had made despite devastating hurricanes last year, adding, "We look forward to participating actively and generously" in the April 14 conference.

The hurricanes caused an estimated $1 billion of damage, while the global financial crisis brought a 14 percent reduction in February in remittances vital to many Haitian families.

Ban has been influenced by a report by British academic Paul Collier which said that if Haiti could improve its roads and ports it was well-placed to benefit from low labor costs and duty-free access it currently enjoys to the US market.

Haiti has a troubled history of dictatorship and political violence. But Annabi's report said the country "now has its best chance in decades to break from the destructive cycles of the past, and to move toward a brighter future."

He said, however, that Haiti needed to move further on moves begun by President Rene Preval to resolve political differences through dialogue if it was to advance in other areas. A key test

of stability would be Senate elections due just five days after the Washington conference.

"At this critical time, Haiti cannot afford the kind of discord that paralyzed the country for almost five months last year," Annabi said.

He also noted that despite improvements in Haitian security forces, the 9,000 UN peacekeeping troops and police there remained "indispensable when a real crisis erupts."

Rice, who went on a Security Council trip to Haiti last month, said much more needed to be done in key economic areas. "Desperate poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, and other socioeconomic problems continue to bedevil Haiti," she said.