

# Vote counting speeds up in Haiti election

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - U.N. troops mobilized helicopters, trucks and even mules to recover ballots from remote areas as an arduous vote-counting process picked up steam Wednesday and Haitians nervously awaited results of long-delayed presidential and legislative elections.

Bleary-eyed election workers counted ballots by candlelight into the late evening after Tuesday's vote, which officials hailed as a success despite massive delays that crippled polling stations and enraged voters earlier in the day. The poll was largely free of violence.

Rene Preval, a 63-year-old agronomist who led Haiti from 1996-2001, was the front-runner among 33 presidential candidates. His closest rivals include Charles Henri Baker, 50, a wealthy garment factory owner, and Leslie Manigat, 75, who was president for five months in 1988 until the army ousted him.

The vote count gained momentum as election workers returned to polls early Wednesday. Ballots from 40 of the 800 polling stations have been counted and were being transported to the capital later Wednesday, said David Wimhurst, a U.N. spokesman.

A trickle of early results should be released later Wednesday, but a final tally isn't expected until Friday at the earliest, Wimhurst said.

"We're still [in the] early days. We have to get the stuff down from the mountain on mules ...so it's going to take a while," he said. "We're sending helicopters so they will help as well."

The U.N. has not received any reports of



*Haitian electoral workers count ballots by candlelight during a blackout in the Bel-Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti on Tuesday. The election has been called a success.*

fraud or other major irregularities in the voting, Wimhurst said.

A huge turnout all but overwhelmed electoral officials, who conceded they were ill-prepared for the crush of voters who formed long lines before dawn.

Many Haitians voted by candlelight Tuesday night after spending hours in lines stretching up to a mile at some polling stations.

"People were yelling and screaming to get inside the voting booths," said Mona Joseph, 21, one of the last people to vote. She had to go to several different polling centers in the capital of Port-au-Prince before finding her name on the voter registry.

Many stations opened late, lacking the necessary workers, security and ballots to handle the crush of voters who turned out by foot, car and brightly colored buses.

Outside the gang-controlled Cite Soleil slum, frustrated voters pounded on empty ballot boxes and chanted. "It's time for Cite Soleil to vote!" In one rural town, a Haitian policeman shot and killed a man in line at a polling station; a mob then killed the officer, a U.N. spokesman said.

Many people in Cite Soleil accuse the government of trying to disenfranchise them, citing as proof a decision not to put polling stations in the slum. Officials said it was for se-

curity reasons.

Experts called the election a step toward democracy in the destitute Caribbean country, saying the heavy turnout showed Haitians felt safe despite warnings that chronic violence would keep voters away.

At least four deaths were reported, but authorities said the balloting was largely free of violence.

Jose Miguel Insulza, head of the Organization of American States, said "a large majority of the Haitian population voted," although no specific numbers were available.

"We will have a democratic government ...that this country has fought so long and hard to have," Insulza told reporters.

The elections, held under the watch of a 9,000-strong U.N. peacekeeping force, were deemed vital to averting a political and economic meltdown in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

If no candidate wins a majority, the top two vote-getters will face off in a March 19 runoff. Full results were expected later in the week.

In the aftermath of a February 2004 rebellion that toppled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, gangs have gone on a kidnapping spree and factories have closed because of security problems and a shortage of foreign investment.

In the northern town of Gros Morne, a Haitian policeman shot and killed a man in line at a polling station, Wimhurst said. A mob then killed the police officer, he said. There were two other reported deaths in polling stations in the capital — two elderly men who collapsed while waiting in line.

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