

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Virtual Briefing
on
Haiti: Options for Improving Human Rights and Security
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Zoom
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Good morning. Thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for hosting this important discussion today. Thank you also for featuring Haitians, and Haitian women especially, as the experts. As I will note later in my remarks, too often this perspective is missing from decisions made on Haiti.

AJWS is the leading Jewish organization working to fight poverty and defend human rights around the world. We respond to the most pressing issues of our time by supporting hundreds of local, grassroots organizations because they know their communities best. My remarks today will elevate what we are learning from partners within Haiti.

Haiti is currently facing a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a governance crisis. I believe the first step towards putting out these fires is to acknowledge where the U.S. and the international community may be inadvertently adding fuel to those flames.

First, on the **humanitarian** front, the U.S.'s abrupt aid stoppage will cost lives. While there are credible critiques of how aid was conducted in Haiti, the way it was halted risks deepening the crises. More than one million people are internally displaced—almost 10% of the country. Displacement is approaching levels seen after the earthquake, yet international response has not been as generous now as it was then. Millions of people are going hungry, overcrowded displacement sites are susceptible to disease, and the free movement of people and goods has stopped. This was worsened by the ban of U.S. airlines to all of Haiti in November, and compounded with the preemptive flight ban to Port-au-Prince until at least this September. Additionally, migration policies threaten to add to this displacement and instability. More than 276,000 people were deported from the Dominican Republic to Haiti last year. In the U.S., refusal to extend Temporary Protected Status and ending Humanitarian Parole means hundreds of thousands more Haitians could be forced to return there in the coming months.

On the **security** crisis, gang violence has risen to levels usually seen in active conflicts, even though the weapons being used are not made in Haiti. The U.S. can and should do much more to stem the flow of illegal weapons going from our shores into the Caribbean. The Haitian National Police has been overwhelmed, and the Multinational Security Support Mission was deployed without addressing Haitian civil society's serious concerns about it. The MSS mandate never addressed root causes of Haiti's violence, and it never clearly explained how it would protect civilians. When it did arrive, it was – and today continues to be – under-equipped and

outnumbered. A more holistic strategy would have included stronger accountability against those who fund the gangs and greater support to local police forces.

On the **governance** crisis, which is fundamentally linked to the security situation, is concern with who makes up Haiti's leadership. First, governance must be decoupled from criminality. For years, Haitian elites have engaged in corruption or funded armed gangs in order to protect their power. Even today, several members of the current government have been accused of corruption. However, the Haitian judicial system is not currently equipped to prosecute all the high-profile cases of government criminality, nor all the interpersonal crimes committed by gang members. In the absence of a strong Haitian judiciary, it is meaningful that dozens of international sanctions have been put on Haitians involved in illegal activity—including former presidents and prime ministers. But too often, the U.S. and the international community supported these politicians while they were in power. These sanctions were also rarely strong enough to deter others from committing similar crimes.

Second, governance must include women. The nine-member Presidential Transition Council currently only includes one woman, and she does not have a vote. Failing to include women is a problem for effectiveness since we know post-conflict solutions are more sustainable when women are at the table. It is a moral failure to not include a demographic that makes up half the population and is uniquely impacted by gang violence. It is also a glaring rule of law failure. It is telling that even while Haiti's constitution says at least 30% of political seats should be held by women, this government – which has the blessing of CARICOM and the United States to set up new elections – did not follow these policies itself.

While the challenges in Haiti may be complex, there is much the U.S. can do to support the changes that so many Haitians have already been fighting for. That includes pausing deportations to Haiti, stopping the flow of weapons to gangs, strengthening the justice system, improving the Haitian police force, and no longer supporting corrupt actors in power.

The protests in Haiti just a few days ago remind us that Haitians are still striving for a government and for a world that will respond to their needs with more respect. After more than 200 years since earning their independence and being forced to pay an independence debt, Haitians are still fighting to be recognized and still fighting to have their voices heard. As we look for solutions to the crisis unfolding so close to U.S. borders, it's time we listen to them.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.