

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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As Haiti spirals further and further out of control, the solutions on the table remain the same as always. But let's say we were to suppress armed groups - they are reportedly over 5-10,000 members strong; are we supposed to arrest, imprison, and try all of these people? With what infrastructure? What judges? What prisons?

To restore stability and democracy in Haiti, I believe there are two key elements: first, resourcing Haitian civil society to design, implement, and monitor transitional and restorative justice mechanisms, and second, bolstering public digital infrastructure.

Let's look at the first.

I was born a year after the 30 year dictatorship, grew up under military regime, and spent my adolescence during the rise of kidnappings in the early 2000s. I have observed how people talk about Haiti's problems my entire life. I have watched corruption go from a disguised practice that is whispered in private conversations or accomplished in empty parking lots, to sitting in a public servant's office and being explained the terms of a bribe out loud, over coffee. I have seen Haiti go through different iterations of the line being drawn where one side is safe and the other is not, and I watched that line disappear so that even those who foster conditions for violence and abuse become targets of the system. I have seen every social class point fingers at each other or at this and that president, or the international community. But what I've never seen, until now, is people's willingness to reflect on the enabling conditions for what we are living today and their insistence that we start having difficult conversations about what really brought us here.

Without waiting for the elusive "right time", we can start changing the course of this crisis today. With simple resources, we can start implementing different campaigns to prepare communities for dialogue and peace processes, we can start collecting stories for truth initiatives, we can facilitate powerful dialogues between previously at odds actors like the police and communities or between the elites and people from popular neighborhoods.

These are all things we can start today, and indeed several people have already begun.

Haitian civil society needs the time and resources to design and implement transitional and restorative justice mechanisms such as community justice like the Gacaca courts of Rwanda for certain types of crimes, commemorative initiatives throughout impacted communities, and other restorative models that can sustain peace in the long term. There is a very real opportunity in this moment for Haitians to lead their own recovery. I believe that the guarantee of non-repetition lies in reconciliation and restorative models, as well as locally led development initiatives that create the conditions for people to thrive and remain good citizens.

It is not nearly as complicated as it sounds and is in fact a much more time and cost-efficient approach that is more likely to yield scalable, sustainable and transformative results. Haitians are in various states of desperation between its multitudes of security, governance, economic and climate crises but I assure you, we are not incapable, nor are we unaware of how to improve the conditions of life for all of our communities, we just need our international partners to reshape HOW they support us.

Secondly, in order to mitigate the risks associated with mismanagement of international funds within the public sector, as well as mitigate opportunities for corruption, the international community should bolster Haiti's digital infrastructure for public accounting, identification (IDs, birth certificates, police files), recordkeeping, voting, and more. For instance, do you know that often during elections, many counts get thrown out because the tabulators made a spelling mistake in their handwritten reports? Did you also know that birth certificates and forms for ID cards are still handwritten? When I had to get my new national ID, the same one that would allow me to vote, the man filling out the requisite form did not know how to read the cursive writing on my birth certificate and misidentified a cursive, capital I for a Y and almost changed my name on an official ID. Do you know how many people get multiple ID cards despite the system allegedly using biometrics? This allows them to buy multiple sim cards associated with a multitude of crimes, sometimes it allows for one person to claim benefits or take out loans under different identities. Within the state's own recordkeeping of employees, also mostly done by hand, there are countless "ghost employees," people who are on payroll but don't even work for the state, or are not even in the country!

It is not normal that public entities can disburse money in cash to projects they are supposedly subsidizing, but I've seen it countless times. It is not normal that a Ministry employee can say without blinking that any money that leaves the ministry is "taxed", meaning that someone or a group of someones in the office get a cut. It is not normal that all of this can happen at the rate that it is happening and very little evidence exists.

At this time in Haiti, there is a decree for the creation of specialized courts to address mass crimes and financial crimes. Digital infrastructure is not only timely, it is in line with already proposed G7 goals.

The international community is weary of solving Haiti's problems because you've defined them according to your standards and given us very little say in the matter. Now is the time to recognize that the solutions of old are not working, and indeed have caused a lot of harm. Haiti does not have the capacity to fund these solutions, but we do have the capacity to design and implement them. I implore this body to consider how much more efficient it would be to help us

build the infrastructure that would adequately monitor resource allocation and support our civil society in fostering the conditions for peace and sustainability to thrive.