



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights in Haiti: Ideas for Next Steps

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

2:00 p.m.

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Good afternoon. Today we will hear from several witnesses, who will describe the many human rights and humanitarian challenges Haiti is facing today, and how we can help.

Haiti never seems to get a break. The country's struggle to overcome decades of dictatorship, and transition to a modern democracy seems to be continually derailed by some catastrophe, whether it be a hurricane, earthquake, epidemic, or something else.

Over the last 18 months, political instability and a severe economic crisis in Haiti has exacerbated its prolonged struggle with extreme poverty, malnutrition, and its vulnerability to natural disasters. All of these overstretch Haiti's capacity to meet the basic needs of its people, and undermine its efforts to shore up the institutions vital to the function of a democracy, like a free and professional media, a strong and impartial judiciary, and rule of law in general.

Following the tragic earthquake in 2010, the country suffered a cholera epidemic that infected 665,000 and killed 8,183 persons. I raised the issue of compensation and treatment for cholera victims on multiple occasions with the United Nations and the State Department.

The lack of capacity and the lack of a culture that respects human rights in the country's security forces has resulted human rights abuses, and makes the country vulnerable to traffickers, and other criminals.

Despite Haiti's efforts to end trafficking and help trafficking victims that allowed the State Department to move Haiti from the Tier 2 Watch List to Tier 2, the country is still a source and destination country for

trafficking, with Haitian children still being trafficked internally in the practice of *restavek*, or domestic servitude. Many ethnic Haitians, despite being born in the Dominican Republic, lack legal status in that country and are exploited in the Dominican Republic to act as agricultural laborers, particularly on sugar plantations.

I also wish to underscore the need for constructive development assistance. We will hear from Paloma Adams-Allen, the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Inter-American Foundation, a US government agency whose grassroots-led model – one shared with its sister agency the Africa Development Foundation – offers an example of how development should be done.

Providing seed money to community-based groups that match or exceed its investment, IAF is helping the Haitian people pull themselves out of poverty. It also sees beyond the capital of Port Au Prince, investing in underserved communities which are too often neglected.

The IAF is currently investing nearly \$5 million in Haiti on various projects. We are calling for increased funding for IAF, in addition to a

transfer of funds from USAID to IAF, as IAF – with its extremely low overhead – is able to more effectively stretch the taxpayer dollar.

Last year alone, the IAF received 55 proposals from Haiti and funded only four of these for a total of \$1.2 million. We believe that a transfer of only \$2 million to the IAF would enable it to nearly triple the number of communities it reaches in Haiti.

With that, I look forward to hearing our witnesses' testimonies.