



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Human Rights in Haiti: Ideas for Next Steps**

**Wednesday, March 4, 2020**

**2:00 – 4:00 p.m.**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on human rights in Haiti.

I would like to extend a special welcome to our witnesses. I appreciate the work that all of you do and thank you for taking the time to share your expertise with us today.

This hearing builds on a previous hearing held by the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee last December. If you have not already seen that hearing, I encourage you to watch it. The Subcommittee's witnesses that day, including two highly respected Haitian human rights activists, provided a dire description of the prolonged political and human rights crisis confronting the country.

Three months later, we have not seen progress in prosecuting the rampant corruption that has robbed the Haitian people of billions of dollars of development resources.

Nor have we seen progress towards accountability for grave human rights abuses, including the 2018 La Saline massacre and the gang attacks in Bel-Aire last November – or, for that matter, the deaths of 42 police officers in 2019.

Instead, in January the country slid into rule by decree under President Jovenel Moïse. This happened because of the utter failure of the parliament and political leaders across the spectrum to form a government or hold elections last fall.

Open conflict recently broke out between the police and the military – a discredited institution that had been disbanded and should have stayed that way.

Meanwhile, chronic poverty and high levels of food insecurity persist. Many people do not have easy access to electricity, water, sanitation or health care. Two children out of ten do not attend primary school, and the literacy rate of those over 10 years of age is 61 percent.

All together, what we see is a Haitian state that is failing to protect the human rights of its people across the board – civil and political, economic and social.

So no one should be surprised that the Haitian people are angry and demanding change. They deserve a better future.

That is why we are holding a second hearing today, so soon after the December Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing. We are saying loud and clear that the Haitian people merit our attention and our help.

And Members of Congress are very willing to help. Many people here have a deep moral and political commitment to Haiti. For years they have led efforts to support human rights and democracy and further the well-being of the Haitian people.

There are bills that have been introduced this Congress, like those of Congressmen Hakeem Jeffries and Alcee Hastings.

Last year Haiti was the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the hemisphere.

All of us welcomed the Administration's decision to comply with a court order and extend temporary protected status for Haitians (and others) through January 4, 2021. It should be extended further as a matter of policy.

So there's no shortage of good will. But there is some frustration that after so much investment over decades, the situation is what it is today.

The reality is that the U.S. Congress is not going to resolve the problems Haitians are facing. Past U.S. interventions in Haiti have often made things worse. It is the Haitian people who must come together to define a path forward.

But it is incumbent on us to help move things forward and that is what we hope to do today. We have two modest objectives:

First, to ask what constructive steps Members of Congress should take to help resolve the governance crisis, a necessary first step for everything else. To give just one example: it's hard to

see how Haiti meets the conditions placed on Economic Support Funds for this year without getting a government in place.

We have all heard the demands that President Moise resign and the criticism of calls for dialogue, and I understand why those positions have traction. I am as appalled as anyone by the corruption and violence and the human rights abuses that are going on.

But what I don't see is how anyone navigates the current legal and political morass without some kind of dialogue. Shouldn't we be asking how to use all our available leverage to make sure that the outcome of dialogue addresses problems like corruption and grave human rights abuses? What's the step-by-step that gets us where we need to be?

Our second objective today is to draw attention to rights-based initiatives that are already helping to empower people and that offer models for effective investment at the community level – the very positive work that the Inter-American Foundation and Zanmi Lasante are doing, and that I am personally very happy to highlight. I am a strong supporter of humanitarian assistance and an even stronger supporter of empowering people and building the productive capacity that makes it unnecessary.

Let me close by thanking you once again for being here today. I will now introduce our witnesses. I look forward to hearing their analyses and recommendations, and to a lively discussion.