

## **Statement of Congresswoman Donna F. Edwards**

### **Hearing on “The Hurricanes in Haiti: Disaster and Recovery”**

#### **House Committee On Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere**

**September 23, 2008**

Thank you Chairman Engel, Ranking Member Burton and the other members of the Committee for inviting me here to testify at this very important hearing. It is an honor to be here today.

As we take action to help our fellow Americans recover from Hurricane Ike in Texas and Louisiana, we cannot forget the pain and suffering of our southern neighbors. Haiti not only bore the wrath of Ike, but also three additional hurricanes as they made their way through the Caribbean.

I went to Haiti with two of my colleagues here today, Congressman Kendrick Meek and Congresswoman Yvette Clark.

Today, I will echo some of the statements my colleagues have already made about the level of devastation that Haiti experienced after these four hurricanes tore through the island. I will also attempt to articulate the images and accounts that I witnessed firsthand that left an impressionable mark on my psyche. Finally, I will summarize some of the steps that we can and must take to help Haiti during this time of crisis, because if we do not act immediately to increase our assistance, the situation in Haiti will only worsen and possibly threaten internal stability and security in the hemisphere.

As some of my colleagues were saying previously this morning, the damage in Haiti is almost immeasurable. The United Nations says some 800,000 people, or almost 10 percent of Haiti's population, are in dire need of emergency assistance. I am focusing my testimony today on some very specific needs as articulated by the U.S. Navy, the Haitian Ministry of Interior and the U.S. mission in Haiti.

The entire food crop for the fall was destroyed by Hurricane Ike. Rice fields and other fields of crops were completely flooded. The damage to the crop will likely have a substantial impact for several years because the soil was also destroyed, leaving the island with very little salvageable agriculture to sustain itself. If we do not support the efforts to bring food assistance to Haiti, we could see an increasing number of Haitians dying of starvation and malnutrition.

The transportation infrastructure in Haiti is completely decimated. Several major bridges were completely destroyed and major roadways look more like rivers. To give the Committee an idea of how bad the situation is in Haiti, while there, I noticed that the water that overwhelmed these roads and towns had not settled and was still rushing. Even today, weeks after Hurricane Ike struck Haiti the U.S. Navy indicated that there are still some impassable roads and several other roads that are passable but with enormous difficulty. The result is that thousands of people are left stranded and isolated, some are still living on their roofs and aid is unable to reach them.

In order to help these victims, we must help Haiti get the tools they need most immediately. They are in desperate need of boats, hold dries or ship repair yards, small piers for landing stages, a rescue center, life jackets, portable bridges and the infrastructure funds to build new bridges.

Even in the areas of Haiti that assistance was able to reach, the situation was tragic. I witnessed people bathing in water that contained rotting animal carcasses because basic utilities such as water, sewer, and power infrastructure were completely destroyed.

To help clear out some of this water and restore some sort of normalcy, the Haitian Ministry of Interior indicated that the country needs water pumps, water generators, and water pipes.

Other short-term needs for Haiti include medical assistance and temporary shelters for individuals that have lost their homes. We also must put pressure on our own Administration to grant Haitians in the United States Temporary Protected Status. The needs I have laid out in my testimony are not exhaustive. Haiti has several other short-term needs but we would be shortsighted if we only focus on what this body can do in the short-term. We **must** also focus on the long-term needs in an effort to stabilize Haiti.

These long-term needs include investment in rebuilding infrastructure, reestablishing a manufacturing sector in Haiti, investments in agriculture so Haiti can produce the food it needs to sustain its population and reforestation to try to protect Haiti from further environmental degradation.

I support the efforts that President René Garcia Préval and Prime Minister Michèle Pierre-Louis are making to reach out to the international community in the next couple of weeks.

Before I close, I would also like to thank Ambassador Janet A. Sanderson for her tireless dedication and commitment. I would like to thank all of the humanitarian groups and aid groups that are currently in Haiti in an effort to assist the victims of these hurricanes. The work they do and have done is invaluable and in situations like the one in Haiti their work really does make the difference between life and death.

I offer a special thank you to the USS Kearsarge and specifically Captain Walter Towns, Commodore Fernandez “Frank” Ponds, and the Rear Adm. Joseph Kernan. They have been working tirelessly to bring aid to Haiti. I just found out yesterday that the USS Kearsarge will depart Haiti in a matter of days. It is imperative that their mission be extended until the communication lines have been established and until the Haitian government and aid organizations can access these remote areas by land. We should not turn our back on Haiti. We **can** afford to help Haiti, the real question is whether we can afford not to help.

I deeply appreciate this Committee’s commitment to Haiti. I look forward to working with the Committee and all of the other Members here to help address the needs of Haiti.