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Statement

Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Haiti Hurricane Relief

September 23, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for calling this important hearing to so that we may put a spotlight on the devastation in Haiti from hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike and the ongoing humanitarian aid efforts.

As many of you know, I represent the largest Haitian community outside of Haiti. Haiti sits only 600 miles from our shores and the security, political, and economic activities in Haiti not only affect my district in particular, but also our entire country. As one can imagine, when four hurricanes hit Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, within a 22 day period, I felt that on behalf of Congress, I had to act.

On September 12th & 13th, I led a Congressional Delegation trip to the Republic of Haiti and was joined by two of my colleagues, Congresswoman Yvette Clarke (D-NY) and Congresswoman Donna Edwards (D-MD). Our goals for this trip were to detail the U.S. relief efforts, to talk to President Preval and Prime Minister Michèle Pierre-Louis about a comprehensive needs assessment that we could share with other interested legislators and our local officials, and to bring back a sense of hope for the Haitian American community that progress is being made.

As we toured the hardest hit areas, the devastation we witnessed that weekend was unimaginable. In certain regions of Haiti the local infrastructure has been completely overwhelmed as floodwaters submerged the ports and airports, and virtual lakes formed over the roads. As hard hit cities such as Gonaïves became isolated, Haitians were forced to live on their roofs for weeks because disaster relief became extremely problematic.

Thankfully, Haiti is not alone. Before Hurricane Ike had even hit Haiti, the US and International donor communities were preparing their relief efforts. In Haiti, I witnessed, first hand, the bravery and dedication of our USAID and military workers working side by side with members of the international community to provide much needed relief. I was particularly proud to see the involvement of Southcom through the relief efforts on the USS Kearsarge. The USS Kearsarge has provided assistance on medical and engineering projects, as well as the continued logistical support to remote areas of Haiti that were heavily damaged by the recent tropical storms. This kind of support is invaluable due to the extreme difficulty in providing these coordination efforts.

Upon returning from this trip, my priorities have been set on pressing for emergency supplemental disaster relief funding for Haiti, to increase the pressure on the Administration to provide Temporary Protective Status for Haitians, to mobilize local U.S. government officials, and to work with the Haitian Diaspora to augment assistance efforts already underway.

Last week, we held a meeting between Members of Congress and the Ambassadors from major donor nations in Haiti to discuss the ongoing relief efforts and to consider what additional resources may be provided going forward. At this meeting the Ambassadors from Haiti, France, Brazil, the European Union and Canada a representative from the Department of State met with Members to openly discuss their various aid efforts and the challenges they have met. One positive result was a general sense that aid efforts may need to be better coordinated. The United States, as a leader in providing humanitarian aid, should improve the synergy between the various private and public disaster aid efforts as well as lead coordinating efforts with our various international partners so that aid distribution is delivered more effectively.

I have also joined with Rep. Hastings the others in the South Florida delegation to ask for Temporary Protected Status for Haitians. This status is long overdue for the thousands of taxpaying Haitian nationals who live every day with the threat of deportation. As the most industrialized nation in the world, we have a moral obligation to protect those who came to the U.S. seeking economic and political stability at a time when Haitian life was very precarious. Through the ongoing economic struggles and the extraordinary toll that recent natural disasters have inflicted on the island, Haitian nationals more than qualify for TPS.

Lastly, I have joined with Chairwoman Waters to call for emergency appropriations for Haiti. We must not forget that the hurricane season is not over yet. Much of Haiti's small but burgeoning agricultural sector has been hit particularly hard by the hurricanes and it was only six months ago

that Haiti was mired in the middle of a hunger crisis. It is essential that we provide the necessary funding to assist in keeping the costs of living in Haiti stable.

As a close friend and ally of the United States since the Revolutionary War we must continue to provide the necessary support to help get Haiti back on their feet. While Haiti has struggled to pull themselves up from the depths of decades of economic and political instability, they have incredibly strong and capable leadership. Through MINUSTAH and President Preval's leadership, stability has been restored to much of the country, most gang activity has been driven out of Port-au-Prince's notorious slums, and the Haitian government has forged ahead with a comprehensive plan for economic growth. Still, this year's hurricane season has threatened much of this progress; we must not waver on our support for Haiti.

Again Mr. Chairman, I thank you for calling this hearing today and look forward to the testimony of the witnesses on the importance of providing substantive aid to Haiti.