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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Chairman:

Members of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am Council Member Mathieu Eugene. Let me thank you for allowing me to testify before this most important body. I humbly come before you not only as a Councilmember of the great city of New York representing the 40th District, but also as an American of Haitian decent, with strong ties to the country of Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora.

Mr. Chairman, few people today can trace their ancestry back to a physical American nation but rather to an American ideal. The words proclaimed on the statue of liberty “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses who yearn to breathe free” are more than just words, they represent the kind of people we in America aspire to be.

I am proud Mr. Chairman to serve in a city, which has embraced the diversity, which marks our nation, and has elected representatives, who demonstrate that sentiment. While we are all Americans, we understand in our hearts that while we were fortunate enough to make the journey to this wonderful place, there are many who were left behind. To fully appreciate what has become of this dream called America, we are taught never to lose sight of where we come from and what might have been.

As Americans, we define our people differently. We do not classify ourselves as a people because of an attachment to a common place of origin but rather a common sense of fairness, justice, and equity of opportunity. There was a time when America believed in isolationism, but with our maturation now we understand that we have a moral obligation to share the success of our democratic experiment with those less fortunate.

I am being asked by my Haitian brethren both here and in Haiti to ensure that the American people have a full understanding of the seriousness of their current situation.

The Haitian people are a proud people, but not too proud to put their families and loved ones at risk by not asking for the help they need.

The Haitian community has been extremely fortunate to receive not only kind words but also substantive assistance from many friends, such as Governor Paterson, Senator Clinton, Senator Schumer and my long time friend Representative Clarke. Let me commend Representative Waters, Representative Weiner; the Congressional Black Caucus under the leadership of Representative Kilpatrick; and Representative Meek for leading the emergency congressional delegation to survey the damage in Haiti. I would also like to thank Representative Rangel for his ongoing commitment and support to Haiti, all the members of the U.S. Congress, the State Representatives in New York and my colleagues in the New York City Council, who have work tirelessly in this effort.

Yesterday I met with Haiti's President Renee Preval who explained in detail that the Nation's top priority is restoring its basic infrastructure. President Preval insisted that, "besides food, water and medicine the number (1) priority is emergency bridges, number (2) priority is emergency bridges and number (3) priority is still emergency bridges". While we, in America collect food, water, and medical supplies, without the roads and bridges to transport them to those who need it most, the situation will continue to deteriorate.

President Preval explained that, "the lack of adequate humanitarian relief will lead to famine, widespread disease, and a bleak long-term future." According to the President, this should have been a time of harvest for the Haitian people but unfortunately the storms came. Before the series of storms hit, the Haitian people were waiting to harvest crops, which would have help them through the food crisis the country was already in. The rice plantations of Latibonite, the country's primary source of rice, were mostly destroyed. When the floods receded, it left up to a meter of mud in some areas burying food, crops, clothing, livestock, and most tragically – people.

He also stated that:

- \$120 million in agricultural investments were wiped out by the storms
- \$100 million in banana profits were lost
- Between 500-600 people have died nation-wide
- A power plant which generated 1 megawatt of power, sufficient to power a large segment of the country was destroyed
- 800,000 of Haiti's 8 million have been affected by the series of storms (1 tenth of Haiti's population)

Yesterday, I also met with the Mayor of Gonaives, Jean-Francois Adolphe who stated that:

- With a population of 300,000 in Gonaives 250,000 are now homeless.
- The floodwaters destroyed the only hospital within the city, swept away and drowned most of its patients in the process

Look at the extent one storm has had in the United States of America, this season in the Gulf Coast, where we had the capability to evacuate and prepare for the devastating storm.

In Haiti, there was no evacuation capability, no adequate shelter and they were at the mercy of four horrific storms.

Thousands of women have vaginal infections from the floodwaters.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the consequences will be even worse than what we have seen, if there is not a concerted effort to avert widespread disease and famine in the coming months.

It is of utmost importance for the United States to address the plight of the Haitian people. Just a few hundred miles off the coast of Florida children are literally starving. The lack of quality health care, cleaning drinking water, affects their basic ability to live normal lives. I am here today to say it loud and clear, and for the record, that the 8 million people of Haiti need America's help NOW.

My colleagues and I are calling on the President of the United States to use his executive authority to grant Haitian Nationals, Temporary Protection Status. In the New York City Council, I have introduced Resolution 1595, which supports H.R. 522 and asks for Haitian nationals currently here in America to be granted Temporary Protection Status.

It is my hope that the President of the United States will grant Temporary Protection Status to the Haitian people.

We hope also that Congress works together to prevent the deportation of people from all countries who have lived within the United States for years and have become an indispensable part of the American society. It is painful to see families broken, children traumatized and the break down of the ability of communities to function. Now also, it is important that while waiting for the President to sign the TPS, we must come together to stop the deportation of Haitians, because Haiti cannot bare the burden.

I recall Congressman John Lewis of the great state of Georgia said on his recent trip to Brooklyn, "We might have all gotten here on different ships but we are all in the same boat". Let us not forget the less fortunate among us. We must work together to ensure that those who are here can have a part of the American dream. Let us understand that as the beneficiaries of this great American experiment, we must heed the call of the "huddled masses who yearn to breathe free."

Mr. Chairman and members of this distinguished subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity, it is my hope that as we work together, we will help Haiti to overcome this difficult period and become a sustainable nation in the western hemisphere.