

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement At Hearing On Haiti
January 28, 2010

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Washington, DC— Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) today delivered the following opening statement at the hearing on Haiti:

Today, Haiti is reeling in the aftermath of what may well be the worst humanitarian catastrophe the Americas have ever seen. Well over 100,000 dead, and more dying every day. An estimated one million Haitians displaced. Large parts of Port-au-Prince and several outlying cities flattened. An already weakened infrastructure basically collapsed.

The numbers simply can't explain the horrors that millions of Haitians are living through. Instead, we begin to understand Haiti's tragedy through stories and images: a tent city next to a crumbled presidential palace; a Haitian child dividing one rationed meal among eight members of his family; a seventy-year old woman rescued from the cathedral in Port-au-Prince seven days after the earthquake—too weak to stand, but strong enough to sing church hymns as she was carried out on a stretcher.

It is impossible not to be moved by the suffering, as well as the resilience and dignity, of the Haitian people. It is our duty as neighbors and frankly as fellow human beings, to respond to their tragedy. And that responsibility doesn't end with rescue. We must help Haiti to rebuild in a way that leaves Haiti better off and better prepared the next time a natural disaster strikes.

Since the quake, America and the world have rushed in with as much assistance as Haiti's infrastructure permitted—quickly deploying search and rescue teams, food, water, medical equipment, shelter, and several thousand troops. We are also well aware of the suffering and heartbreak that has affected the hardworking Haitian-American community. Indeed, my home state of Massachusetts is home to the third-largest Haitian community in the United States, many of whom have lost relatives and close friends – we must do what we can to help.

There has been a tremendous outpouring of generosity from Americans and the international community. People have opened their wallets and their homes. I have been working closely with dozens of families in Massachusetts to expedite adoptions of Haitian orphans that were under way before the earthquake. We are also working to make sure our government's relief efforts provide for the thousands of Haitian children orphaned or displaced by the earthquake, within the safeguards of the formal processes that protect the children from trafficking.

I would like to commend Dr. Shah, Secretary Clinton, and countless other Americans inside government and out who have made an impressive effort that all of us can be proud of. I would particularly like to honor U.S. diplomat Victoria DeLong, who lost her life, and to recognize the enormous loss suffered by the UN. The UN has made a massive contribution in Haiti over the years and, when the earthquake struck, they lost many outstanding people on the ground. We offer our profound gratitude and our condolences to the UN and to the families of the deceased. We also mourn the loss of Britney Gengel, and the agony her parents, Leonard and Cheryl Ann, have gone through trying to recover their daughter's body.

Of course the task before all of us is far from over.

First, we must continue the enormous ongoing effort to meet Haitians' immediate need for food, water, shelter, electricity, and emergency medical care. So far, thanks to UN peacekeepers and U.S. forces, the security situation has allowed these efforts to proceed in general calm.

Second, we need to use this humanitarian crisis to begin reversing the poverty and environmental degradation that plagued Haiti long before this tragedy. We cannot be satisfied to simply return Haiti to the unsustainable conditions of the past.

On January 11th, Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Even before the quake there were 380,000 orphans in Haiti. Most Haitians lived on less than a dollar a day; one in eight children died before their fifth birthday, and 40% were not enrolled in school; 120,000 Haitians were HIV-positive; and rural Haitians were plagued by malnutrition.

We need to help Haitians build a sustainable foundation – physical, social and economic – for a stronger and more stable society. This is a chance for Haitians to re-imagine their country as they rebuild it.

We must use every opportunity to help Haiti improve its living standards. Haiti has duty-free, quota-free access to the US market, a large pool of low-cost labor, and a large, hardworking North American Diaspora sending money home. Haiti was making steps toward recovery when the earthquake struck, and violent crime was declining. Haiti's progress will be more sustainable if its government takes a serious look at longer-term challenges such as environmental devastation and runaway population growth.

Third, Haiti's recovery must belong to the Haitian people. They may need our help today, but they must be empowered to build their own future down the road. President René Préval and Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive need to lead the national recovery, and civil society and democratic institutions must be protected and nurtured. Haiti's long-term success depends on a government that can inspire its people, work with the private sector, attract investment, and marshal resources to provide basic services, security, and rule of law.

Some have said that Haiti is a lost cause. Based on all I know of the Haitian people, and I've learned a lot more in recent days, I couldn't disagree more. Even in the darkest hours after the earthquake, Haitians who were poor to begin with—and then lost everything—reached out to help each other. They searched for missing neighbors and strangers, provided comfort and shelter and shared their meager food.

Looting and violence here and there may make headlines, but it is the Haitians' determination and decency in the face of disaster that will make the country's future. Schools may have collapsed, but Haitians' commitment to education will not.

Elisabeth Debrosse Préval, an economist and the president's wife, urged the Haitian people to "stand up again and move forward." As they do, America will be there to help.

We are fortunate to have with us today three impressive witnesses with deep knowledge of Haiti and the challenge that we and the Haitian people will face.

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