

Written Testimony of Ambassador Kenneth Merten

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, I am honored to join you here today.

Haiti suffered a massive magnitude 7.0 earthquake on January 12, 2010 with an epicenter just southwest of the capital, Port-au-Prince. An estimated 2 million people lived within the zone of heavy to moderate damage. The earthquake was the worst in Haiti in the last 200 years. Thirty-five seconds changed the face of a nation that was already the poorest in our hemisphere. The quake left 230,000 dead, displaced more than 1.2 million, and according to the Post Disaster Needs Assessment led by the World Bank in cooperation with the Government of Haiti generated an estimated \$11.5 billion in damages and reconstruction costs. Assisting Haiti in recovery and rebuilding is a massive undertaking and requires a well-coordinated, well-funded, Government of Haiti-led effort. The outpouring of international support has been tremendous, but this is not only about numbers, it is about the Haitian people and those from around the world who have been united in partnering with them.

On behalf of the Embassy staff, I would like to convey my gratitude to Congress, and especially this Committee, for its continued concern for and

unflagging support of Haiti, its people, and those of us on tours in the country. I have been involved with Haiti on-and-off for more than twenty years. This is my third tour. I have served as a Consular Officer, later as Chief of the Economic Section, and as Assistant to the Special Advisors on Haiti. I have seen first-hand the progress the nation has made, making it even more devastating to witness the destruction of the earthquake—physical, social, and economic. In my 23 years in the Foreign Service, I have never been prouder of the work I am doing and the people with whom I serve. In the face of tragedy—more than a third of us lost our homes, and all of us have had a family member, friend or colleague die or suffer injury — we came together and worked to do all we could for those in need.

Many Haitians do not refer to the earthquake by name. They call it “*bagay la*” meaning “the thing.” They ask each other where they were when “bagay-la” happened. I want to share with an example from Embassy personnel.

Deputy Regional Security Officer Pete Kolshorn who lived on a ridgeline, immediately leapt through the door of his house and looked for his neighbors who were also Embassy staffers. Their house was gone. Looking over the ridge, and down about two stories, he saw an Embassy officer buried up to her waist, face covered with dirt and blood, calling for help. He then saw her husband moving in spasms to try to free himself. Beyond him, Kolshorn saw an arm protruding from the wreckage. Without a thought for his safety, he threw a hose over the cliff, scaled down sheer rock to reach the victims and with the assistance of one of the Embassy’s Local Guard Force Locally Employed Staff members, Renald Jean Belfort. All three were seriously injured—two with head wounds. With the help of neighbors,

Kolshorn brought all three up the cliff where there were two doctors. One man needed immediate medical care. Carrying two stretchers at a time, then returning for the third, Kolshorn worked to get to the main road. This effort took seven hours—having to trek through the most horrific of conditions. When he came upon a trapped child, Kolshorn put the stretchers down and with the help of a stranger fed the child. If someone had told me this story five months ago, I would have had difficulty believing it. Today it is a reality.

The same night, Assistant Regional Security Officer Rob Little covered Port-au-Prince on motorcycle visiting every American employee's residence to check on them, particularly in cases in which we had not been able to contact them. He helped us determine that night the whereabouts of our employees and he did so in total darkness with street thronged with homeless people and blocked in many cases by rocks, trees, houses, and worst of all bodies.

These are just two stories of the heroic efforts that occurred in the hours and days following the earthquake. Our conference room became an emergency operating room; we evacuated 16,000 Americans back to the U.S.—including my wife and two daughters—one of the largest such evacuations since World War II; we delivered humanitarian aid, food and water; and seldom slept more than four hours. Many of us slept under our desks, in the hallways or in tents. I slept on a cot in the Embassy for three weeks, because I could not get back to my house.

Indeed, it was the funds granted the Haiti Mission by the Congress that allowed us to build the resilient US Embassy in Port-au-Prince. Our

Embassy, which was completed in June 2008, became a safe-haven for so many in the aftermath of the quake—serving as nerve center, shelter, hospital, kitchen, and perhaps most importantly, a place where we could all come together and support each other.

Our efforts would not have been possible let alone successful without the support of colleagues across the government and around the world. We had more volunteers than desks for them to sleep under; were in contact with the USAID and the Department of State here in Washington every minute of the day; they and countless other agencies supported us as we supported each other in the most selfless of ways.

Today we remain committed to supporting the Government and people of Haiti as they set out to build back better.

At my confirmation hearing last July, I stated that in the aftermath of the tropical storms and hurricanes that caused extensive damage from 2006 to 2008, Haiti simply did not have the resources to rebound from such setbacks on its own. That observation is even more true today.

We have much to be proud of – the U.S. Government's responsiveness to date and the results that we have achieved working with the Government of Haiti and international partners have been great as Chris Milligan's testimony states. Now is a period of transition—from the most critical humanitarian relief efforts to long-term development.

The International Donors Conference Towards a New Future for Haiti that took place on March 31, 2010 sent a clear message: donors and the

Government of Haiti are committed to working together to make the vision the Government presented for its country, reality. The conference raised \$9.9 billion in pledges for Haiti's reconstruction. On behalf of the United States, Secretary Clinton pledged \$1.15 billion over two years to help Haiti lay the foundation for long-term sustainable development. In so doing, the United States, together with the Government of Haiti and other donors, committed to hold itself to the utmost levels of transparency and accountability; to include all stakeholders; give greater voice to the Haitian people in the delivery of our assistance; and to coordinate efforts and avoid duplicative investments.

I am glad the legislation that Chairman Kerry and Senator Corker proposed echoes this commitment. It demonstrates that the United States is committed to supporting and partnering with the people and Government of Haiti, as both President Obama and Secretary Clinton have said, not just in the months to come, but in the years to come. It focuses on long-term development goals that align with the needs of the Government of Haiti, while not forsaking humanitarian relief efforts. I am happy to say that much of what is called for in the proposed legislation is happening both on the ground and in Washington. Going forward, maximum flexibility is what is needed to address the ever-changing and uncertain situation on the ground. Our hope is that we can continue to work with you and your staffs to provide this necessary flexibility as you develop a legislative response to the crisis.

Learning from what took place after the Southeast Asian Tsunami, the Government of Haiti is on the path to create a Haitian Development Authority. To give the Government of Haiti time to stand-up the Authority, the Government has empowered an interim structure. For eighteen months

there will be The Interim Haitian Reconstruction Commission, whose mandate is to ensure that implementation of the Government of Haiti's plan is coordinated, projects are properly planned and sequenced, efforts are effective, bottlenecks are be swiftly addressed and all involved adhere to the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

We are also please that Congress recently passed the Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) Act, which extends trade preferences to Haiti that will lead to job-creating investment there.

There is much to be done in the coming months. President Preval has announced his intent to hold elections, originally scheduled for February, before the end of the year. The United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the International Foundation for Electoral Support (IFES) have completed election assessments. We have begun working with the Government of Haiti and our international partners in support of Parliamentary and Presidential elections expected later in 2010. As was the case in 2005, the UN through MINUSTAH, the OAS and CARICOM will play vital roles in the logistics and security around the elections, registering of citizens—including those who are displaced—and monitoring the balloting.

Shortly after assuming office, Secretary Clinton called on the State Department and USAID to undertake a review of U.S. policy on Haiti – to evaluate our existing programs and policies, assess the alignment of our efforts with the needs of the people and Government of Haiti, and determine how we can be most impactful. Through an interagency review process, consultations with the Government of Haiti, and fellow donors, we identified

four key sectors for future U.S. investment – agriculture, energy, security/rule of law, and health in which the United States has comparative advantage in providing assistance. After the earthquake we revisited our assessment, again discussing with the Government of Haiti what its greatest needs were and what it wanted from the United States, and expanded the scope to accommodate new needs in governance and infrastructure. The Government of Haiti strongly supports deep investment in these key sectors and in pursuing these investments, we will adhere to the following set of principles:

- U.S. assistance to Haiti will be deployed in an integrated plan, focusing on specific sectors and geographic regions of the country.
- U.S. assistance to Haiti will respond to Government of Haiti priorities and build the Haitian Government's capacity toward sustainable and economic growth.
- U.S. policy and assistance to Haiti will be aligned around common development goals and harness the strengths of the entire U.S. Government through a coordinated approach.
- U.S. assistance to Haiti will leverage and complement the resources of other donors and the private sector.
- U.S. assistance to Haiti will be subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

We are confident that these investments will help Haiti realize a better tomorrow.

Over the course of the past four months, I have witnessed the worst human suffering and the best in human compassion and support. Tragically the Embassy lost several members who continue to be missed and in memory of whom we remain committed to our efforts on the ground. Among the deceased are: Victoria DeLong, the Cultural Affairs Officer at the Embassy who had worked to build bridges of understanding and respect. The wife and young children of Andrew Wyllie, a decorated State Department officer working with the United Nations. And six locally employed staff: Jean-Daniel LaFontant, Orliche Jean, Jacques Josue Desamours, Laica Casseus, Joseph Fontal, and Racan Domond.

Much has been said about the resilience of the Haitian people. Indeed, they are incredibly strong people whose love of life, even over the past four months, has inspired so many of us. Together with the Government of Haiti and international partners we can achieve lasting change and help the Haitian people realize sustained development and stability. Years from now when people ask where I was when “*bagay la*” happened, I will recount the story of those thirty-five seconds, but more importantly I will recount the many heroic efforts and common humanity that followed.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.