

Statement of Ambassador Kenneth Merten
Nominee as U.S. Ambassador to Haiti
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am honored to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Haiti. I am grateful for the trust and confidence President Obama and Secretary Clinton have placed in me by nominating me to this critical Mission. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing the dialogue that we have begun here today.

I would like to note that my wife, Susan, and daughter(s), Caryl and Elisabeth have joined me here today. I have benefitted from their support and encouragement prior to and during our two previous tours in Haiti and I believe their excitement about this new appointment -- should you confirm me -- will be a huge asset to both me and the Embassy community.

Mr. Chairman, I have been involved with Haiti on-and-off for more than twenty years; first as a Consular Officer and later as Chief of the Economic Section. My experience working on economic and development issues in Haiti, as well as serving as Assistant to the Special Advisors on Haiti, gave me first-hand exposure to the United States' efforts to help Haiti build its democracy.

Mr. Chairman, Haiti remains a deeply troubled country. Periods of violent political instability have slowed the economic growth Haiti needs to lift its people out of poverty and delayed development of democratic institutions. Environmental degradation and lack of government resources make Haiti uniquely vulnerable to the damaging effects of tropical storms, while an economy dependent on imports for basic necessities finds it difficult to withstand the shock of high world prices for food and fuel. Drug trafficking in and through Haiti corrodes the rule of law and breeds corruption.

Haiti has many needs, and I have no illusions about the great difficulty of the undertaking before me. Yet I look forward to the challenge with a sense of optimism, knowing that Haiti now has many of the elements it needs for a successful transition to become the peaceful, democratic, and more prosperous nation we all want it to be.

At present, the combination of open political space in Haiti and physical security is better than it has been in many years. The UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, or MINUSTAH, which deployed in 2004, has played a significant role in improving the climate of security.

Better security has provided a platform for economic growth and a measure of progress for democracy. National elections in 2006, which international observers regarded as free and fair, produced a multi-party cabinet that held out the prospect of rule by consensus, something that has been notably absent in previous governments. Delayed elections for the Senate took place this spring. Parliamentary and local elections are scheduled for November 2009, and the next presidential election is set for 2010. Holding to this election schedule and providing security for free and fair elections are crucial for the consolidation of democracy. MINUSTAH needs to remain in Haiti at least through the presidential election and transfer of power following it, and the international donor community must also help with technical and financial support for elections .

Haiti enjoyed modest economic growth from 2006 through part of 2008, when escalating food and fuel prices sparked civil disturbances in some parts of the country and four tropical storms and hurricanes caused extensive damage. Food and fuel prices have since stabilized, but storm damage set back Haiti's development agenda and stalled economic growth.

These events highlight the critical importance of maintaining engagement by the international community over the long-term. Haiti simply does not

have the resources to rebound from such set-backs on its own, and will not for some time. At a Donors Conference held in Washington mid-April, multilateral and bilateral donors met with Prime Minister Michele Pierre Louis and other high-level Haitian government officials to hammer out an assistance plan to address hurricane recovery needs while at the same time meeting longer-term development goals. In her remarks to the Conference, Secretary Clinton stated in unequivocal terms the Administration's commitment to continued U.S. bilateral assistance and to active collaboration with our international partners and the Haitian government on fulfilling its development agenda through the timely delivery of assistance.

As the Secretary indicated in her remarks, the United States must lead the endeavor to build a better and stronger Haiti; a Haiti which can ultimately take full responsibility for its own destiny. Over the last three fiscal years, the United States has provided more than \$900 million to Haiti's development, specifically for poverty reduction, education, health, and strengthening the rule of law. Maintaining robust levels of assistance for Haiti will signal the strength of our commitment for other donor nations to emulate.

Mr. Chairman, what happens in Haiti is important to the United States.

Haiti is a friend and neighbor whose stability and prosperity bolster our own security and well-being. Building Haiti's capacity to grow its economy, create opportunities for its people, provide for the security of its citizens, and contribute to the security and stability of the region, will result in a strong steady partner for the United States. In addition, our efforts in support of Haiti will reduce the incidence of humanitarian crises in Haiti, such as the mass migration events in which thousands of Haitians have risked their lives in perilous, often fatal, sea voyages in order to seek better economic prospects for themselves and their families. Our support will also help Haiti acquire the tools it needs to prepare for and recover from the devastating storms to which it is subjected every year.

If confirmed, I will lead the Embassy team in further advancing the United States' efforts to make a democratic, stable, economically viable Haiti a reality. I believe that our hopes can only be achieved in close partnership with the government of Haiti. Should I receive your approval to represent the United States in Port au Prince, I intend to establish a close, cooperative relationship with Haiti's leaders and to build on the solid foundation laid by my predecessor, Ambassador Janet Sanderson. I intend to represent the United States in Haiti by setting a tone of mutual respect and optimism. A

Haiti that has the full capability to take responsibility for its own more prosperous and democratic future is certainly in the United States' and Haiti's best interest.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I want to assure you that should I become the Ambassador in Haiti, I will, to the best of my ability, work to achieve the ambitious goals I have laid out today.

Thank you.