

Haiti Testimony

Hi, my name is Pamela A. White, former US Ambassador to Haiti from 2012-2015. I first served in Haiti from 1985-1990, my first as a foreign service officer. I witnessed the removal of Baby Doc and the subsequent horror show that went on for years after his departure.

Most of my career was working for USAID – from 1978 (first as a contractor) until 2008 when I became Ambassador to The Gambia. That is thirty years of development experience, including serving as USAID Mission Director in Mali, Tanzania, and Liberia.

Although I have not lived in Haiti since 2015, I have many Haitian friends with whom I am in contact and follow the political scene closely. This does not make me the leading US expert on Haiti. I do believe that my years of working in Haiti and my long USAID career do give me insights that might be of some value. These are my opinions and only my opinions.

As you all know the situation in Haiti is highly volatile. Every single day there are reports of decapitations, rapes, and murders. Kidnappings are at an all time high. The human rights situation is deplorable. Four million Haitians are suffering food insecurity. Half are living on less than \$2.40 a day. There is a weak judiciary, a threatened press, and no parliament. In short, Haiti is once again, a mess.

With this backdrop in mind, I will touch on two issues near and dear to my heart: elections and aid (in general).

First the elections. It is difficult for me to imagine having successful elections this year in Haiti. Putting aside for the moment (because I truly do not know the answer) if President Moise should have left on February 7, 2021 or should leave next year – I do not believe that right now all the necessary institutions are in place to assure a smooth transition. FYI - The USG, OAS and UN have all stated that Moise term ends in 2022. Several Haitian constitutional experts as well as Harvard, Yale and NYU law school clinics disagree.

The CEP that was appointed last year does not have representatives from organizations that have long been considered requirements – like the church and opposition leaders. The last CEP resigned en masse refusing to serve under President Moise. The Supreme Court refused to swear in the current members. I do not believe the current CEP can be considered legit. This can be quickly corrected if parties come to the table.

I have been told that 2.8 million voters have been registered, but only 1.7 million cards have been issued to voters. Over six million were registered in 2016. The current government says they have the capability to register two million voters a month, they are currently falling way short of this goal. An impartial neutral audit needs to happen yesterday. The Executive Branch decision to discard the previous well respected registration data bank was a mistake.

And there is the money problem. The last elections cost over \$150 million dollars. I wonder what international support there will be for elections that are so tainted. I do not see the USG giving 33 million dollars as in 2016 considering the current chaotic atmosphere. The international community will have to draw some firm lines in the sand that will hold Haitian leadership accountable for both a smooth transition and vastly improved security. If lines are crossed, the money stops.

Helen La Lime, UN Special Representative said in her latest report (Feb 2021) that “above all else, a minimal consensus among relevant political stakeholders would greatly contribute to creating an environment conducive to the holding of a Constitutional referendum and subsequent elections”.

Although I think the entire question of a referendum to change the constitution is extremely dubious, I agree completely with the rest of her statement. If we do not get “minimal” consensus among the relevant actors, Haiti will not be able to pull off credible elections.

So, a few quick suggestions. If President Moïse will not step down, he should step aside or UP. He MUST be completely transparent and honest. He must bring relevant actors to the table. A well-respected Haitian (not from either the private or political sectors) should be appointed Prime Minister. He or she should immediately dissolve the current CEP and call a summit of some kind with all relevant political actors to establish a legal CEP. I would hope that the UN and the USG would both help fund such a summit and commit to acting as mediators if asked. The ONI (voter registration) also needs immediate help. I tried online several times to establish how many Haitians were already registered but could not find a reliable number, but they have a long way to go.

The new Prime Minister’s team will also need to articulate a security plan. If President Moïse stays in power his job will be to maintain peace. Stop the brutal beatings and gang violence. Start acting like a senior statesman.

Let me just quickly also touch on the topic of foreign aid. I believe Haitians desperately need humanitarian aid such as food and basic health care. USAID can deliver both even under the worst political conditions and should continue to do so. WFP should also continue its outstanding work. I do not have insights into USAID’s portfolio so cannot comment except to say that normal developmental activities are almost impossible to implement in volatile environments.

AND one last comment. AID “conditionality” became a dirty word in the 2000’s and many countries took it completely out of any strategic thinking. I personally have always thought aid conditionality is fine. If country X wants USG funding, I think USG taxpayers can expect a certain return on investments. In this example, I could not give one penny to elections until a new CEP is established and a security plan is in place.

Free and fair elections are important pieces in any democracy’s complex puzzle. But having an election will not transform Haiti – it never has and never will.