

**Written Testimony of Leonie M. Hermantin**

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**Submitted to the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and  
Trade House Foreign Affairs Committee**

**Hearing on “Haiti on the Brink: Assessing U.S. Policy Toward a Country in Crisis”  
December 10, 2019**

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Ronney, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee

Good Morning,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Ronney, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing at this crucial moment in Haiti’s history.

This hearing is timely because Haiti is yet again at another crossroad. We face yet again another crisis but this time it is man-made. Other speakers with more expertise have talked about the political situation. Therefore, I will limit my short remarks to two broad categories. One is the humanitarian crisis and the other is the security crisis.

I am here as a member of the Haitian Diaspora. In the United States alone, there are over 1 million persons of Haitian ancestry, the majority of whom are naturalized or US born citizens. While the initial wave of Haitian migration settled in the North East, we can say that today, Haitians live throughout the country. I come from South Florida, considered the largest Haitian enclave in the country.

Our Diaspora is a diverse one, and we don’t always speak in one voice. With regards to Haiti, I can safely say that we are unified on key points. **Haiti’s poverty offends us.** We are hardworking people with an exemplary work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. Our people deserve better.

- Like many of you we are confounded by the lack of results from US investments in Haiti. And like the “**PetroChallengers**” demand to know what happened to the billions of Petro Caribe funds we too want to know about the impact of the billions of US taxpayer dollars invested in Haiti for the past 30 years. Why is Haiti still labeled the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere?
- We all agree that the current status quo which supports corruption and the violation of the rule of law must be abolished.
- We all agree that Haiti needs to invest in education, agricultural reform, job creation, and constitutional reforms.
- We believe that Haitians must resolve their problems

### **First, the Humanitarian Crisis**

The crisis that began last July 2018 has picked up steam this year and resulted in what Haitians now know as “*peyi lòk*” or country lockdown. As you can imagine, in a fragile economy like Haiti the smallest shock can upend the lives of the great majority. One way that many in Haiti have been able to survive is with the support of family and friends in the diaspora.

According to the World Bank, remittances from the Diaspora to Haiti reached record levels in 2018, amounting to \$ 3.1 billion from 2.4 billion in 2017, a 30% increase. In addition to the distress that these issues have caused to those of us in the Diaspora, this current crisis has a direct financial impact on Haitian-American households as we are often the economic lifeline for the families back home. Data indicates that 90% of remittances come from North America

This crisis does not only affect the economy but also schools, hospitals and has virtually ground the public sector to a halt. That means the citizens are unable to receive basic care and services. All the indicators and reports from various local and international institutions are warning of huge humanitarian crisis. All the key indicators are on red. Some economists are projecting an optimistic growth rate of 1% while many more are expecting a depression. Inflation is nearly 20% and very likely much higher than that by now. Basic foodstuff has seen a vertiginous rise. On average rice has risen 18, corn 28 %, meat is 23.%, eggs are 31%, and even the items that are produced in Haiti, such as yam, grew by 32% and potatoes by 28%.

These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg. Many businesses are shutting their doors and the ones that are open are laying off staff, which will increase

unemployment in a country that already has double-digit unemployment levels and an even higher underemployment for decades.

## **Second, the Security Crisis**

The crisis also has to do with increased level of insecurity. Unlike past unrests, this past few weeks have been a broad uprising the like of which we have never seen. Such movements tend to further exacerbate the security situation in the country. While these used to be localized and limited to specific areas – mostly in the major urban areas like Port-au-Prince, Cap Haitien, Cayes, Gonaives; today's security crisis is widespread including a major spike in gang activities. What is worst is that the state, which is responsible for protecting the population has failed. Members of the business and political class are openly arming or financing gang activity.

For many of us in the Diaspora, the inability of the Haitian government to guarantee our security has forced us to cancel personal, humanitarian and business trips.

## **Recommendations:**

When it comes to Haiti the US has made it clear that it believes in elections and in democratic processes, but has ignored the Haitian people's relentless demands for change. It is clear, paradoxically, that the US' position is more flexible in other parts of the world. In Hong Kong for example, we proudly stand with the people, not their elected leaders.

We believe that it is important for the US, to listen and respect the voices of the people. We, Haitian-Americans, would welcome bi-partisan support for the Haitian people in their call for justice, and social and economic inclusion.

We urge you, the policy makers, to increase support for cross-border anticorruption programs because that will have an immediate effect on local governance. In turn, good governance will yield positive impacts on social and economic policies. We know hundreds of millions were siphoned out of Haiti and hidden in offshore accounts. Corruption is a crime, it kills, literally. It is time to take action! Let's return these funds to the people of Haiti.

We also recommend that the US work in partnership with Haitians locally and diaspora experts as opposed to the big international development organizations. For example, USAID has just launched a project called "Gere" in partnership with the Haitian government, which itself is a party to the ongoing crisis. We need to be more creative and stop using unsuccessful strategies with the same actors who

propose the same programs under different titles to get the same results. The Haitian people and the Diaspora demand accountability and transparency, neither of which are always forthcoming under current USAID practices.

I will take these last seconds to sound the alarm about the humanitarian crisis that is in the making in Haiti. We cannot close our ears, minds nor our hearts. We cannot absolve ourselves from what is to come.

The indicators do not lie; they are predicting or foretelling an impending humanitarian crisis. As the US acts to provide relief to Haiti, we would humbly suggest a better coordination with the Haitian community in Haiti and the Diaspora. While there has been lip service paid to partnering with Haitian-Americans, there was never a true political will nor the mechanism to make this partnership a reality. Often, US agencies in Haiti take the easy route and funnel their support through bilateral and multilateral agencies, the usual suspects – commonly known as the beltway bandits. We believe a better strategy is to leverage the diaspora to maximize the US investments in Haiti. The diaspora is an underutilized asset that has yet to be mobilized effectively. To achieve this policy goal will require a catalyzing partnership between the actors, which include the US.

To quote Martin Luther King:

“Why should there be hunger and deprivation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?” There is no deficit in human resources. The deficit is in human will.

I suggest that we must think more creatively. We must work more collaboratively to help avert this crisis. And we must prevent the suffering that is about to befall so many families.

I will use the last few seconds to first thank my representative, Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, for the opportunity to speak before the committee.

I also want to thank Speaker Pelosi for her attention and follow up after the Miami roundtable.

I thank the committee for holding this hearing.

Lastly, I want to thank my community.

Leonie M. Hermantin, Tuesday, December 10, 2019