

“Haiti on the Brink: Assessing U.S. Policy Toward a Country in Crisis”

Prepared Testimony

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I begin my testimony by thanking Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Rooney, and the members of this distinguished committee for the opportunity to testify before you today about the current situation in Haiti – and to offer some ideas on what needs to be done to address the pressing challenges there. It is an honor for me to be here. I look forward to hearing from the committee and my fellow panelists and the subsequent discussion.

The testimony that I provide you today is in my personal capacity. The views and opinions are my own, informed by my more than two decades of experience working on Latin American and Caribbean issues, including a longstanding engagement with Haiti that has included more than a dozen trips to the country, most recently in November 2019. However, among the other institutions with which I am affiliated, I would like to also acknowledge the Inter-American Dialogue think-tank, where I worked on Haiti for many years and whose leadership has encouraged my renewed inquiry on the political and economic situation in Haiti.

My testimony today will focus on two areas: (1) a review of the current situation in Haiti; and (2) what a forward-leaning and constructive response by the United States and the broader international community should look like in 2020.

Introduction

Haiti today is experiencing its most profound political, economic, and social crisis in a generation. This is no small statement to make, given that Haiti, a country that is the second oldest republic in the Americas after the United States, is no stranger to crisis. Indeed, in the decades since the end of the Duvalier

dictatorship in 1986 and the first free election in 1990, Haiti has experienced numerous breaches of constitutional rule, seen leaders ousted through military force or civil unrest, twice been ruled by interim, unelected civilian governments, and experienced devastating earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods.

Yet if the Haitian people remain on many levels polarized and divided – on one issue there is a national consensus: Haiti has never experienced anything quite like this. Under the administration of the current President Jovenel Moïse, the political system is breaking down at all levels. The nearly eighteen months of convulsive protests and national strikes – that began in the aftermath of a poorly-timed fuel price hike in July 2018 and culminated most recently in twelve weeks of protests from September to November 2019 – have devastated the country’s already threadbare economy. “Peyi Lòk” it is called in Creole, which translates to “country lockdown.” This is a landscape where schools, courts, businesses, and public services all but cease, and economic activity stops. Now combine that with massive protests, violent clashes between the police and protestors, virtually unchecked corruption, a furious battle between government and private interests over state resources and private contracts, a growing threat of gangs both in Port-au-Prince and the countryside, and a pervasive environment of impunity. Haiti’s political and economic system has been hit before – and hit hard – both by man-made and natural disasters. But never before have the country’s politics fractured, its economic networks short-circuited, the bottom fallen out of its social safety net (much of which consists of international organizations, churches, and NGOs that have scaled back or ceased operations in the country), and the international response been so lackluster – all at the same time.

How did Haiti’s crisis become so severe? I would argue that the dramatic deterioration of the past 18 months has resulted from three overlapping crises. The first crisis, which is well-known to the members of this committee, is the decades-long struggle for Haiti to achieve a basic or minimal level of governability, including respect for democratic norms and the rule of law, a reasonable degree of social development and stability, and a sustainable pathway towards economic growth. The second crisis emerges from the calamitous developments and decisions during the administration of President Jovenel Moïse, who assumed office on February 7, 2017. These include an inability to build or sustain political alliances, bitter partisan conflict between the President and parliament, economic mismanagement, a growing cascade of corruption scandals, and excessive use of force against protestors, just to name a few. Several major reports focusing on the misuse of PetroCaribe funds by members of the current and past governments have galvanized public sentiment and created a rallying cry with deep social resonance.

Both the President and his fiercest political opponents have exacerbated polarization, and either blocked or undermined attempts at dialogue, leading to the breakdown of public administration in Haiti. Since March, the country has been without a confirmed Prime Minister to set policy and run the government. The entire Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of Parliament) and two-thirds of the Senate (the upper house) are set to expire in January 2020 with no new election on the horizon. Thus, the constitutional order will again be ruptured. The President will be left to rule by decree – most likely absent a political accord that would confer his decrees with greater legitimacy. For the United States, this will no doubt further complicate foreign assistance efforts and diplomatic engagement with a country that is already among the least free in the Americas.

What makes the present moment in Haiti so extraordinary – and alarming – is that the country’s historic and acute crises have now converged with such force that the country’s long-stressed social and economic foundations have been shaken to their core. Moreover, this critical juncture has emerged against the backdrop of a third crisis: a crisis of apathy and indifference among Haiti’s international allies and partners. Despite recent signs that the depth of Haiti’s agony is beginning to pierce this apathy, there still has been nowhere near the level of mobilization required by many of the governments and institutions that have historically taken responsibility to help Haitians and their governments during earlier periods of despair in the country. It is this “crisis of apathy” that I believe this committee is best positioned to address.

Haiti’s Fractured Politics

Haitian history is too rich and deep to fully cover in the scope of this testimony. However, one thing that is clear from a review of the country’s 205 years of independence is that the current crisis in Haiti is occurring on a historic basis of weak institutions, poorly developed democratic norms, high levels of state capture, and a largely inhospitable external environment. Aspects of the current predicament can be backdated to various historic milestones, such as the inception of Haiti as the world’s first free black state in 1804, or the U.S. military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, or the Cold War era dictatorship of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier from 1957 to 1986, which ended with a transitional military government and a new constitution in 1987 that still governs Haiti to this today. In 1990, Haiti’s transition to democracy ushered the country’s historic crisis of governance into the modern era, when the election of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was followed by his ouster in a military coup in 1991. Haiti then spent three years under military rule from 1991 to 1994, until President Aristide was

restored through an international United Nations mission led by the United States, but with his term abrogated by new elections in 1995. His successor, Rene Preval, was elected as president from 1995 to 2000. Aristide was re-elected president in 2000, but only served three years of his second presidential term, from 2001 to 2004, until he was again ousted from power after confronting armed rebellion at home and international pressure, including from the United States, to cut his term short. Following this disruption in democratic rule, the United Nations stepped in to set up the international U.N. peacekeeping force known as MINUSTAH. Haiti was led on an interim basis by Prime Minister Gerard Latortue from 2004 to 2006, before new elections brought President Rene Preval back to power from 2006 to 2011. In 2010, Haiti was struck by a devastating earthquake that flattened much of the capital city of Port-au-Prince, causing the deaths of more than 200,000 people and resulting in one of the worst natural disasters in modern history. Nevertheless, Preval concluded his term as scheduled and was replaced by his successor, President Michel Martelly, who governed the country until February 2016.

Unfortunately, the transition from Martelly to the current president of Haiti, Jovenel Moise, was far from smooth – and indeed, resulted in more than a year where Haiti was without an elected government. To briefly recap, the initial presidential election to replace Martelly was held on October 15, 2015, but was deemed to have been marked by widespread fraud and vote-rigging. Neither of the top two candidates – either Jovenel Moise or Jude Celestin – achieved the outright majority necessary to avoid a run-off vote, but the required second round was postponed multiple times due to lack of agreement and fears of violence. Meanwhile, Martelly left office in February 2016 without an elected successor, ushering in a one-year period where Haiti was governed by an interim president, Jocelerme Privert. In June 2016, the results from the first-round presidential election of October 2015 were annulled, and the date for the new elections – essentially a do-over of the prior first-round election results – were scheduled for November 20, 2016, more than a year after the original presidential ballot was held. In this new round of elections, Jovenel Moise won an outright victory over Jude Celestin, with 55% of votes cast, and was sworn into office on February 7, 2017. The important point here is that, more than a quarter-century after Haiti's first free presidential election in 1990, Haiti's historic crisis of governance remained very much alive before President Moise's term in office commenced. Even during a period of relative stability, a political impasse prevented the smooth, democratic transition of power at the end of the outgoing president Martelly's term in 2016. The persistence of Haiti's historic crisis of governance then merged with the acute political crisis that has unfolded over the past two years.

When President Jovenel Moise took office in February 2017, it marked a return to the constitutional order for the first time in twelve months. Moise, a close ally of former president Martelly and member of his Bald Head Party (PHTK), entered office with scant political experience and without an outright majority in either the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate, although his party did hold the largest plurality in both houses. This structural political challenge has bedeviled Moise from the very beginning, as Haiti's political system consists of an elected President who must then appoint a Prime Minister, subject to parliamentary approval, to run the government. While every Haitian President has struggled with this balance – and many Prime Ministers have entered the National Palace expecting to run the government only to find themselves principally deployed as a political shock absorber and scapegoat – Moise's record with Prime Ministers has been especially abysmal. Since 2017, there have already been four Prime Ministers: Dr. Jack Guy LaFontant (March 2017 – September 2018), Jean-Henry Ceant (September 2018 – March 2019), Jean-Michel Lapin (who served in an acting capacity from March – July 2019), and Fritz-William Michel (July 2019 to present.) The first two were dismissed following widespread protests regarding Moise's economic policies, while the latter two were never confirmed by the Parliament and only hold their titles on an interim basis. Effectively, this means that Haiti has lacked a fully functioning government since March 2019.

Moreover, the crisis of political legitimacy is about to accelerate dramatically, as the ongoing political stalemate has prevented the holding of new congressional elections that had been scheduled in October 2019. This means that the entire Chamber of Deputies and somewhere between one-third and two-thirds of the Senate (a figure in dispute as one-third of the Senate has already had its terms in office extended due to previous electoral delays) will cease to hold office on January 13, 2020. At that point, Haiti will have an elected but highly embattled President, no Prime Minister, no functioning Congress that could potentially confirm a nominee or pass legislation, and no plans for elections on the foreseeable horizon. Therefore, while the level of civic unrest in Haiti has diminished in recent weeks, and some signs of normalcy have begun to return, any sense of calm surely will not last. As CSIS senior associate Georges Fauriol notes in his article "[Haiti's Next Crisis](#)," published on December 6, "A temporary pause in national protests provides no evidence that the basic architecture of the political crisis has been altered... This means trouble and runs the very real danger of transitioning into a full blown politico-humanitarian crisis – in fact, the ingredients are already there."

Economy in Free Fall

Haiti's gridlocked politics are sinking an economy that struggles even in normal times to stay afloat. Haiti has long been the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, ranked 168th of 189 countries in the worldwide 2018 Human Development Index published by the United Nations. According to the World Bank, its per capita GDP is only \$870 dollars. Out of a population of nearly 11 million, 6 million live below the poverty line, including 2.5 million that live below the extreme poverty line of \$1.23 per day. Over the past two years, the Haitian gourde (the local currency) has lost half its value against the U.S. dollar, further depleting the purchasing power of the average Haitian. None of these statistics are on track to improve in 2020. At the conclusion of the most recent economic consultations between the Haitian government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which took place the week of November 25, the head of the IMF team issued a statement that "the political, economic, and social crisis confronting Haiti is without precedent," and added, "As consequence of repeated lock-downs in the country . . . growth for the 2019 fiscal year is expected to be negative, at about -1.2 percent, while inflation rose to above 20 percent at end-September. This has worsened poverty and insecurity and deprived the government of the means to take productive investments and support activity." Even Haiti's most optimistic economic projections for 2020 barely exceed 1% growth, which is below the rate of population growth and would therefore imply either zero or negative growth next year.

Separately, last month the World Food Programme said that food insecurity in rural Haiti had increased 15% during 2019 due to disruptions in agricultural production, with more than one-third of the population – or 3.7 million people – requiring urgent assistance to meet daily food needs. Of this group, one million were estimated to be facing a food emergency (which is the Phase 4 level according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC). There are estimates that this number could increase by 10% to 4 million by March 2020.

In addition to food security challenges, Haitians continue to face important shortages of basic consumer goods, including fuel, water, and life-saving medicines. During the height of the "country lockdown" in the fall, most public services ceased – including, critically, schools – meaning that for two months nearly 2 million Haitian school children did not attend classes which, for many of them, also meant lack of access to school feeding programs. Haiti's energy sector is also of particular concern. In recent weeks, the Haitian government has unilaterally stopped payments with a private electricity provider. Neighborhoods that used to get 8 hours of electricity a day now only get between 3 and 5

hours. The face-off has plunged Port-au-Prince into further darkness while raising costs for businesses that provide their own energy through generators.

Meanwhile, the government has interfered in the functioning of the National Statistical Agency (IHSI, or Institut Haitien de Statistique et d'Informatique), which had been one of the few Haitian institutions respected for its honesty and absence of political interference. As a result, the country has entered into a “statistical blackout” period. This means that the depth of the economic crisis – which has surely deepened during the last 12 weeks of national strikes – is not currently known. The last annual inflation rate was published in August 2019. Official Haitian government data on quarterly economic activity and annual GDP growth are not now being published. Unless quickly reversed, this will further imperil cooperation with international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank that require official data as benchmarks for future agreements. In June, for example, the International Monetary Fund put on hold a three-year, \$229 million loan to Haiti that it had proposed in March, citing the country’s economic uncertainty.

Indeed, regional organizations like the Inter-American Development Bank have developed deep expertise in Haiti and played an important role in sectors like agriculture, infrastructure, and through projects such as the Caracol Industrial Park in Northeastern Haiti, which has created 14,000 jobs, with 60% being held by women. Important work is also being done by the Inter-American Foundation, which targets the most marginalized and underserved communities in Haiti, supporting community-designed and community-led projects, including women, youth and other traditionally disenfranchised groups.

The United States remains the largest single bilateral donor in Haiti, but both the amount and kind of support has changed dramatically over the past decade. According to the Congressional Research Service, the Fiscal Year 2020 request is \$145.45 million. If enacted, this figure will represent a 21% decrease from the \$184.56 million allotted for Haiti in Fiscal Year 2018. Moreover, more than two-thirds of recent funding for Haiti is concentrated in critically important Global Health Programs. But Economic Support Funds and Development Assistance, which accounted for more than one-third of aid at the beginning of the decade, when overall assistance for Haiti was regularly in excess of \$300 million, have been cut back dramatically in recent years. Following President Moise’s recent request, the U.S. Agency for International Development has agreed to provide 2,000 tons of food aid, an important first step but still a drop in the bucket when

compared with the growing humanitarian need. In November, the U.S. Naval Ship Comfort visited Haiti from November 6-11. According to the U.S. Southern Command, during the six-day mission in Port-au-Prince, more than 3,603 patients were treated at on shore-based medical site, and 76 surgeries were performed aboard the ship. These were important measures that provide vital support but cannot replace a more comprehensive and systemic solution.

Human Rights, Security, and Migration

Haiti's prolonged political conflict has deeply strained a system where human rights protections were already meager. According to the U.S. State Department's 2018 Human Rights report on Haiti, based on 2017 data, "human rights issues included isolated allegations of unlawful killings by police; excessive use of force by police; arbitrary detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; a judiciary subject to corruption and outside influence; physical attacks on journalists; widespread corruption and impunity; and human trafficking including forced labor." In the past year, there have been two major massacres carried out by armed gangs. The first, in La Saline in November 2018, killed at least 26 people according to the United Nations, while Haitian groups estimate a higher toll of 71. The second, which occurred in November 2019 in the Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Bel Air, killed at least 15. More recently, Amnesty International has documented, including with video footage, two central problems in terms of government efforts to control the protests: use of live ammunition and the indiscriminate use of less-lethal weapons (i.e., tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets). On November 1, 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that "at least 42 people have died and 86 have been injured as tensions have escalated since the latest round of protests began on 15 September, according to information verified by our office. The vast majority suffered gunshot wounds. Reports indicate that security forces were responsible for 19 of the deaths while the rest were killed by armed individuals or unknown perpetrators."

Haiti's deteriorating security situation occurs just as the United Nations has dramatically scaled back its presence in Haiti, from the large peacekeeping mission of MINUSTAH (2004-2017), to a smaller justice support mission called MINUJUSTH (20017-2019), to the current United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH). This means the 15-year peacekeeping operation in Haiti ended on October 15, 2019, as the United Nations transitions to a smaller footprint under BINUH focused on good governance and strengthening the justice sector. The Haitian National Police, which now number nearly 15,000, is a far more developed

and professionalized force today than was true a decade ago. This is largely due to the training provided by the United Nations peacekeeping mission, as well as U.S. assistance totaling \$250 million since 2010. However, the police force has been set back by recent events. Officers who are not trained in managing large public disturbances have misjudged the use of force and in some cases committed clear abuses. Moreover, the growing crime rate and the increasing boldness of criminal gangs – not just those traditionally based in the slums of Port-au-Prince – has incited more insecurity in the countryside that is beginning to overwhelm police capacity. Throughout 2019, the U.S. State Department has designated Haiti with either a Level 3 (Reconsider Travel) or Level 4 (Do Not Travel) warning, reflecting growing crime and unrest.

One casualty of decreased U.S. citizen travel has been hopes for a rebound in Haiti's travel sector. In April 2013, the Best Western Premier Hotel made news as the first U.S. hotel chain to expand into Haiti in many years. In October 2019, it closed down permanently. Delta Airlines, which has been providing service from the United States to Haiti for a decade, will cease all flights as of January 9, 2020, due to lack of demand. Meanwhile, Haiti's main north-to-south highway connecting Cap-Haitien to Port-au-Prince has become a zone where the main threats have transformed from road conditions and erratic drivers to an area where gang activities have a new and unwelcome presence. According to the United Nations' Global Study on Homicide 2019, which bases its results on 2017 data, Haiti's homicide rate of 10 per 100,000 was far below the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) and in fact lower than some comparable regional countries, such as the Dominican Republic. But given the events of the past two years it seems highly likely these numbers will rise in the report's next iteration.

It should come as no surprise that more and more Haitians are leaving Haiti: crossing the land border to the Dominican Republic, launching crafts on the Caribbean sea to the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, and the United States, or catching the first flight out of Haiti to whatever country will take them in. The intensifying economic and social pressures are creating a migration wave from Haiti of substantial but unknown proportions. Part of this can be seen in the steady stream of public reports of migrants interdicted at sea. The Coast Guard returned 86 intercepted Haitians last November, another 70 in January, in early February at least 28 Haitians died at sea off the Bahamas, with 33 intercepted in April, and another boat with 50 in May off the coast of Cap Haitien. During one week in August, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted 37 Haitians on a freighter off of Turks and Caicos, then another 146, while a third boat with 53 aboard made landfall on

the islands. At that time, the U.S. Coast Guard reported that between October 2018 and August 2019, approximately 3,414 Haitian migrants were interdicted at sea, compared to 2,727 in the entire preceding Fiscal Year. Notably the total number of Haitian migrants found at sea outstrips the combined total of intercepted migrants from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and other Caribbean territories.

Since 2010 earthquake Haitians living in the United States have been among the ten nations whose citizens have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and the approximately 59,000 recipients constitute the third-largest group from any country after El Salvador and Honduras. According to the Center for Migration Studies, the average Haitian TPS holder has lived in the U.S. for 13 years and 27,000 of them have U.S.-born children who are U.S. citizens. In November 2017, the Trump administration initially sought to cancel this benefit for Haitians by 2018, a decision that was blocked by a California federal court, forcing the U.S. government to extend the program to January 2020. In a Federal Register notice on November 4, the Department of Homeland Security announced that TPS beneficiaries from Haiti (as well as several other countries) will have their designation extended until January 4, 2021.

Haiti 2020: The Role for the U.S. in Shaping the Agenda

Haiti has suffered periods of sharp deterioration before – and in virtually every instance the international community, led by the United States, has sought to respond in a robust and forward-leaning manner to identify core problems, work toward practical solutions, and alleviate reduce human suffering. Not every engagement has been successful, and some have been counterproductive, but important lessons have been learned. The first is that if the United States does not lead, no one else will step up to take our place. Second, the results have been more successful and more sustainable when Washington has been joined by partners across the hemisphere –from Canada to the Caribbean to South America – as well as allies in Europe and key international institutions like the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and the multilateral development banks. The third lesson is that, while political consensus is impossible in Haiti – and therefore should not be held out as a goal – political compromise can be attainable. But it can only be achieved when the international community joins forces and Haitian political leaders understand both the stakes and the consequences.

There are stakes and consequences for the United States as well. Haiti's increasing instability in a region already experiencing widespread unrest may force the U.S. to undertake a broader intervention that is still, at this stage,

preventable. In recent months, the United States has sent increasingly senior level envoys to Haiti to call for national dialogue and good governance, including U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft and, most recently U.S. Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale, who traveled to Haiti in March and again in early December. The argument that Haiti's political solutions must come from Haitians themselves, and cannot be enforced or dictated by the United States, certainly contains some validity. However, there is no sign that intermittent calls for dialogue and hopes for Haitian-led problem-solving have lodged any success in 2019 or are likely to do so in 2020. Instead, these efforts need to be clearly linked to an overarching bilateral and multilateral strategy that brings sustained diplomatic pressure on Haiti's leaders while taking steps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis among innocent Haitians whose lives have been upended. In the eighteen months since the protests began to convulse Haiti in July 2018, hard-won hindsight has clearly shown a crisis that is accelerating in virtually every dimension. Therefore, the time is ripe to propose new approaches in 2020. Without a change in course, Haiti's deterioration will continue in ways that will be damaging both for the Haitian people and for the national security of the United States and our nearest neighbors in the Caribbean.

In this context, I would like to congratulate this committee for the foresight of holding this hearing and taking on the crucial task of beginning to reinsert Haiti as a priority issue in Washington that will require more sustained and focused attention. As we turn to 2020 – a year that will mark the 30th anniversary of Haiti's first democratic election and the 10th anniversary of the tragic Haitian earthquake that claimed so many lives – Haiti must assume a more central role on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. As an initial series of steps, I recommend the following:

1. Secretary of State Pompeo convene – as soon as possible and no later than the first quarter of next year – a ministerial-level meeting of the Haiti Core Group – which consists of his counterparts from Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the European Union, the United Nations, and the Organization of American States – with the objective of formulating a comprehensive strategy towards Haiti to meet humanitarian needs and lay the framework for a successful congressional and presidential elections in the 2020 – 2021 timeframe.
2. Following the ministerial, the United States and its Core Group partners should spearhead a Haiti economic strategy and humanitarian relief session on the margins of the IMF/World Bank annual meetings in April – including international relief groups and NGOs – with the objective of identifying how to rapidly surge food aid and economic support into Haiti's hardest-hit

communities and warding off the possibility of severe malnutrition or even famine forecast to affect up to 4 million Haitians in 2020.

3. A comprehensive review of US and international security assistance to Haiti, with the objective of strengthening the Haitian National Police – one of the positive legacies of more than 15 years of a UN peacekeeping presence – and ensuring that funds are not diverted either into the Haitian army or paramilitary apparatuses that threaten the rule of law and human rights.
4. The extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians in the United States past the current 2021 expiration date and examination of possibilities for humanitarian parole for needy Haitians or those whose lives are at serious risk.
5. Lastly, the U.S. Congress could establish a short-term, bipartisan and bicameral working group of members, under the framework of “Haiti 2020.” The purpose would be to create a more active role for Congress to monitor developments, convene experts, engage with Haitian counterparts and members of the international community, and ensure that Haiti occupy a prominent place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda next year with the aim of a full restoration of an elected democratic government as soon as possible and certainly by no later than 2021.

In conclusion, the crisis in Haiti is deep, complex, and cannot be solved either by the Haitians alone or by the United States or by any other single country or international actor. However, I am confident that the members of this committee, working together with the U.S. administration and the broader international community, can do considerably more to help put Haiti back on the path towards democratic governance, more equitable and sustainable development, and social peace. There is no question that much hard work lays ahead. The first crucial step will be to restore Haiti to a prominent place on the U.S., regional, and international agenda.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your questions.

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