

**TESTIMONY OF
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FOUNDER OF YÉLE HAITI
BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about the needs for development of my country, Haiti, the first Black Republic in the world. Unfortunately, today Haiti finds itself the last in terms of development in this hemisphere. It didn't have to be that way—and certainly cannot remain that way, only about 800 miles from the shores of Florida. I will not dwell on the past, except to say that Haiti has paid a heavy price for having been the first to challenge slavery in the late 17th century. Many have benefited from the prowess of those black slaves who defied all odds to present the world with its first Black State on January 1, 1804. Among these beneficiaries are the great United States of America and several countries of Latin America, including Venezuela, that owe their greatness or independence to Haiti. In other words, Haiti was—and will remain—the trailblazer on the road to human freedom.

The example of Haiti was resented by the international powers of that day. They feared that the fire of freedom would also engulf their domains. Thus began the containment policy that effectively stunted Haiti's growth from day one. The country's resources were spent in paying indemnity to France for an independence won on the battlefield. The United States of America would not recognize the new State until nearly 60 years after the fact. Nonetheless, the Louisiana Purchase—for \$15 million—took place, because the Haitians defeated Napoleon's crack troops.

This short detour into history was meant to put in perspective Haiti's dire poverty today. It was planned that the Haitian example would fail, so that other enslaved people wouldn't be inspired to follow that route. So, when you read about Haiti as "the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere," remember that it got where it is because there was an international plan to get it there. By saying this I am not absolving our own leadership that failed in the past to heed the motto on our flag: "*L'union fait la force*"—In unity there's strength. That's how we gained our independence.

I rejoice, however, when I see a revival of interest concerning Haiti on the part of the international community. The recent renewal of the UN Mandate last month underscores the commitment of the international community to help Haiti find peace and security and ultimately economic stability for the future. As if the current actors on the world scene would want to help us undo what was done in the past.

But after some 200 years of neglect, almost everything is a priority in Haiti: health, education, infrastructure, jobs, security, justice—all that's needed to achieve a healthy economy and a stable, vibrant society. One is overwhelmed as to where to begin. It makes me think of a story I was told about a man who said, "I am so hungry I could eat an elephant!" Someone asked: "How would you do that?" He responded: "Bite by bite!"

EDUCATION

Well, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, that's where I come in. When I look at all the unschooled children in Haiti, I say education is vital for Haiti to move forward. According to UNICEF, only 52 percent of primary school age children in Haiti are actually in school. That figure drops to 17 percent for boys and 20 percent for girls by the time they are secondary school age. Then, we are hit with the brain drain. Our most educated and professionally capable move to more developed countries.

The United States can help by earmarking more—not less—aid to education in Haiti. For example, in the current Congressional Budget Justification for Fiscal year 2008, the request for education to Haiti stands at \$6.8 million, of which \$4 million goes to PL480 feeding programs. That leaves only \$2.8 million for feeding the minds. In fiscal 2006, the figure for Haiti was \$10.4 million.

A bill introduced last year in the House (HR 5091)—the Henry J. Hyde Scholarships for Haiti Act of 2006—has Congressman Lantos as the first sponsor. Where do we stand with that bill? It is intended to help talented disadvantaged students to study in America and return home to contribute to the development of the country. This laudable endeavor should be enacted into law.

I would not feel justified in asking for consideration of these ideas if I was not directly involved in education in Haiti myself. Working through the non-profit organization I founded, Yéle Haiti, I have enlisted the help of many individuals, donor governments and corporations in order to make a modest contribution in Haiti in this field. We currently provide scholarships that give nearly 7,000 poor children the chance to attend primary school. We sponsor 10 of the country's top students in Haitian universities. We are helping to provide education and vocational training for former child gang members so they have a second chance.

Yéle sponsors a program for 650 of the country's most disadvantaged youth that combines schooling, soccer and after school study. We are installing a state of the art computer lab in a high school in Croix-des-Bouquets (my birthplace), and we assist in taking hundreds of students a year on environmental education excursions to Parc La Visite in Seguin, one of the few remaining green spots in Haiti.

Yéle is grateful for the support of the U.S. government to our work in education. We received help from USAID when we worked with the Pan American Development Foundation to rebuild 20 of the schools in Gonaives that were damaged by tropical storm Jeanne in September of 2004. And I am pleased to announce today that Yéle has entered into a partnership with the KATA job creation initiative, a USAID program that is implemented by CHF International, to collaborate in building five vocational training centers in Port-au-Prince, Petit Goave, St. Marc, Gonaives and Cap Haitien. We hope that construction will begin on the first of these vocational centers before the end of this year.

It is also fitting to recognize Voila (previously known as COMCEL), the American owned cellular provider that launched service in Haiti in 1999. This company has been the single largest corporate sponsor of Yéle since we launched in January of 2005, and they continue to underwrite our education activities—making them the largest corporate sponsor of education in Haiti.

JOB CREATION

As important as education is, job creation could be said to be more important. For, without jobs, where will the money come from to sustain the schools? How can the bread winners put bread on the table without jobs? The HOPE bill, recently enacted into law by Congress and signed by the President, is the kind of signal that needs to be trumpeted. It is narrow in its scope, because it's a trade bill that addresses the need of the apparel industry. Yet HOPE is significant because it signals to investors that Haiti is again open for business. Undoubtedly its implementation will attract businesspeople that still remember what Haiti offered in the 1980s. Of the more than 150,000 jobs in the transformation industries in Haiti back then, we are now under 20,000. Who remembers that at one time all the baseballs batted in the major leagues were made in Haiti? No more. The same could be said of other products that were manufactured in Haiti for the American market—from brassieres to electronic parts.

Haiti needs to get back all the jobs it lost—and more. With the certification of HOPE later this month, we will have taken the “first bite” in eating the elephant on that front. At this late hour, however, there are those who would still try to block the certification of HOPE. My hope is that you in this committee will bring your influence to bear with the President to encourage him to do the right thing by Haiti. HOPE should be certified before the target date of March 20.

After HOPE, I urge the United States Congress to support measures to provide Haiti full parity with its regional partners as provided by the CAFTA-DR legislation. In addition, I ask that Congress work with the Administration to investigate other bilateral programs that can help the U.S. private sector enter the Haitian market. Specifically I would ask that some thought be given to an ambitious project announced in January in Wilmington, Delaware, that could have major repercussions on the environment in Haiti. Surplus wood from Delaware—and perhaps from Pennsylvania—will be shipped directly from Wilmington to Haiti for fuel, thereby helping to alleviate the problem of deforestation in Haiti.

An even more important opportunity awaits Haiti if the initiatives underway to promote energy independence in the Americas are given support in Haiti. Haiti offers the potential to help the ethanol trade in the region as it becomes one of the major centers of experimentation. The country can also develop a viable and sustainable biofuel industry based on the cultivation of crops like *Jatropha* that could bring renewable fuels to local markets. This appropriate technology of renewable energy, coupled with an entrance into the global ethanol market will not only create jobs for Haitians, but will also provide a more sustainable source of income and investment for Haiti's future.

I would not be clamoring for help to the private sector for job creation if Yéle was not also involved in that area. Our first venture was a partnership with the Pan American Development Foundation called “*Pwojè Lari Pwòp*”, which literally translates as “*Project Clean Streets.*” Some 2,500 people a day are employed, and the funding for the project comes from USAID. Just as *Pwojè Lari Pwòp* comes to a conclusion soon, Yéle is launching two new employment initiatives: *Yéle Cuisine* and *Voilà Toupatou*. The first is a micro-enterprise program where newly established women's associations in poor neighborhoods become owner-operators of food outlets, selling two-thirds of the meals they cook and donating one-third to children in the same area. The women receive business and management training along with micro-credit assistance.

The second program involves our longstanding educational sponsor, the telephone company Voila. They have just launched *Voilà Toupatou*, a micro-enterprise venture whereby individual local entrepreneurs sell time on a customized cell phone. Over one hundred agents have already received grants and business skills training through the USAID/KATA job creation initiative. The project is going to be jointly branded with Yéle Haiti, and the public will know that a percentage of every call goes to support Yéle's education projects.

THE ARTS

Anyone who has visited Haiti will tell you the importance of art for the country, especially visual arts. One could say that "Haiti is a nation of artists." Since the 1940s when some American artists began discovering Haitian painters, our art has imposed itself in the Caribbean and on the international scene. The late Katherine Dunham became enamored of Haitian culture and integrated Haitian Voodoo and folkloric dance in her work. This guiding light of modern Afro-American dance was known as the best Ambassador of Haitian art and culture, and it was my great privilege to meet her not long before she died. Last year the Embassy of Haiti here in this city recognized her contribution at a special gala event in her memory at the Kennedy Center. Among those who paid her tribute was Congressman Charles Rangel, who has since become the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. He said, "Miss Dunham told me not to ever forget Haiti. ... and I promised that I wouldn't ...and I will keep my promise." We need more like Congressman Rangel to get Haiti moving forward in the field of art and in other areas.

Haitian art, properly packaged, will become a magnet to attract tourists from far and wide. It's a complement to the new campaign started by our Ministry of Tourism to make Haiti once again a main attraction for North American tourists. Let's remember that in the 1940s right to the '60s, Cuba and Haiti were the two major tourist destinations in the Caribbean. The Phoenix will again rise from its ashes! The U.S. can go a long way toward helping Haiti regain the lost ground by helping with security. Thus, the State Department wouldn't have to issue those travel warnings about Haiti that do so much damage.

Whereas education and job creation are new fields for me, the arts are what I know best. From the start of Yéle, I have experimented with ways to use music in particular to help implement our projects in Haiti. This began two years ago when we started using local musicians to deliver food into slum neighborhoods where no other organization or police, or even the MINUSTAH, as the U.N. forces are known, could go. This musician-based program has continued and we supply about 8,000 people a month with free food supplied to us by the UN World Food Programme.

Last year we held a hip-hop competition in which underprivileged youth wrote original raps on themes of picking up garbage in connection with the USAID-sponsored *Pwojè Lari Pwòp*. This year we will be launching a national version of this competition. Young people are being invited to write raps on any one of several key social issues. This national competition will be undertaken in partnership with USAID/KATA. The grand prize winner will get, among other things, a contract on my *Sak Pase* label.

Another project called Yéle Cinema involves free Creole-dubbed films shown in the slum neighborhoods which we will be interspersing with short messages about social and development themes.

THE HAITIAN DIASPORA

For Haiti to really move forward, the Haitian diaspora has to be integrated into what's happening in Haiti. It is estimated that about 2.5 million Haitians live outside Haiti, which boasts an internal population of 8.5 million. According to a study released last week by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), in 2006 the Diaspora transferred \$1.65 billion (b as in boy) to relatives and friends in Haiti. The approximately 1.5 million Haitians living in the U.S. accounted for \$1.17 billion of the remittances. In other words, the Diaspora contributes about one-third of the Gross National Product.

Most of the funds transferred go for consumption. Some mechanism should be found to canalize some of these funds into development projects. Perhaps the regional and professional Haitian organizations established in this country could pull their efforts together into a Diaspora Fund for Development that would channel a small percentage of these funds into viable projects in various communities in Haiti for the benefit of all.

A lively debate has been taking place in Haiti on amendments to the 1987 Constitution to, among other things, empower the Haitian Diaspora. The current Constitution bars the double nationality. Thus, some of the best and brightest sons and daughters of Haiti who chose another nationality in order to fit in their new environment are punished by the restrictive aspects of the Constitution. As it is, a constitutional amendment allowing Haitians to have the double nationality will result in more involvement of the Diaspora in the development of Haiti

CONCLUSION

After the missed opportunities of the past few years, Haiti has shown some maturity as exemplified by a series of elections held last year that resulted in democratically elected representatives at all levels of government. For the first time in nearly two decades, there is no contestation of the vote. A new wind of unity is blowing through the land, with several political parties represented in Parliament and in President Préval's cabinet. A major effort is under way to combat the insecurity that plagued Port-au-Prince, with the United Nations working side by side with the President. Now it is essential to follow with job programs and educational opportunities to give a sense of hope for a better future.

Haiti is collaborating with its neighbor, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and the United States in a campaign against drug trafficking. The international financial institutions have acknowledged that the new government of Haiti is continuing to put order in the finances of the country while combating corruption. Obviously, there is a window of opportunity for Haiti to start the long march toward development. With your support, Mr. Chairman, and the members of this committee, we hope to change the image and the reality of Haiti.

Thank you.

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