

Statement of Congressman Alcee L. Hastings
Hearing on "The Hurricanes in Haiti: Disaster and Recovery"
House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
September 23, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Engel and Representative Burton for holding this extremely important hearing today. I am honored to be here.

As you well know, in less than a month's time, Haiti has been ravaged by not one, but four natural disasters. Roads and bridges have been wiped out, leaving many communities isolated and only accessible by air. Fields and crops have been flooded, obliterating the nation's meager domestic food supply. Over 850,000 individuals have been affected with 423 people reported dead, over 150,000 people internally displaced, and nearly 40,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed.

It would take decades for a wealthier, more stable nation to recover from challenges similar to those facing Haiti. However, Haiti also lacks the physical and economic infrastructure necessary to protect its citizens from natural disasters. Any development efforts are further stunted by the constant crisis and turmoil affecting the nation. The tragedies of the last few weeks have shown us that by our refusal to take substantive action, we not only leave the Haitian government vulnerable to greater political instability but we also increase the likelihood of human and physical loss from the probable event of future natural disasters.

I have long been an advocate for issues affecting Haitians, both in Haiti and in our own country. This past April, I offered an amendment to the Jubilee Act that unanimously passed the House of Representatives. My amendment called for the immediate cancellation of Haiti's international debt. I am also the author of H.R. 522, the Haitian Protection Act, a bill currently under consideration by the Judiciary Committee. This bill would direct the Secretary of Homeland Security to grant Haitian immigrants currently in the United States Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Though I believe passage of this legislation is imperative to Haiti's short and long-term stability, it must also be stressed that TPS is a designation the Administration can grant on its own prerogative without the direction of Congress.

As Haiti's humanitarian crisis becomes increasingly dire and the nation's struggle for economic stability and sustainable development is further delayed, it is now more imperative than ever that the United States grant Haitian immigrants TPS. TPS is the least expensive, most immediate form of humanitarian assistance we can provide Haiti. It also allows the Haitian government to invest all of its limited resources in rebuilding and redevelopment.

Under Section 244(A) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990, TPS may be granted when any of the following conditions are met: there is ongoing armed conflict posing a serious threat to personal safety; it is requested by a foreign state that temporarily cannot handle the return of nationals due to environmental disaster; or when extraordinary and temporary conditions in a foreign state exist which prevent aliens from returning. Now, more than ever, Haiti meets all of these conditions.

As Haiti's President René Prével explained in his February 2008 letter to President Bush formally requesting TPS, Haiti has long been victim to persistent poverty, political turmoil, and environmental destruction. The deportation of Haitian nationals in the United States only increases the burden on this small nation's already stressed economic and political system. TPS, granted for a designated period of time and subject to renewal, would halt deportations and grant work permits to most of the estimated 20,000 Haitians believed to be currently residing in the United States illegally so that they can legally contribute to Haiti's economic recovery.

It is important to note that TPS would not, as some may suggest, lead to a mass influx of Haitian migrants. TPS only applies to individuals who arrive in the United States before the designated date. Perhaps most significantly, there was no major increase in immigration levels after the U.S. granted approximately 50,000 Haitians Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) in 1997 in anticipation of the passage of the Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act of 1998.

The United States has rightfully acknowledged and supported the efforts of other nations to return to a sense of normalcy by granting and extending their TPS. At the same time and under equally dire conditions, Haitian migrants have not received similar treatment.

Just 600 miles from our shores, political and economic instability in Haiti impacts our own economy and immigration levels, thereby making it our responsibility to work to ensure Haiti's long-term stability. Haitians, both in Haiti and in our own country, have long suffered through natural destruction, persistent poverty, repressive regimes, and the inequitable policies of the United States. It is now our moral obligation to help Haitians sustain and rebuild their country by granting Haitian nationals already residing in the United States TPS.

While I am encouraged by the United States' willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Haiti, emergency assistance will only go so far. Haiti needs a comprehensive, sustainable solution to put it on a path of long-term stability, and I believe that TPS is a necessary part of that solution. Otherwise, we will be back here again, year after year, trying to pull Haiti out of another crisis.

I commend you for your commitment to the Haitian people and thank you for bringing attention to this continuously struggling nation. I look forward to working with you on this very important matter.