

**Opening Statement**  
**Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

**The Hurricanes in Haiti: Disaster and Recovery**

*Tuesday, September 23, 2008*

A quorum being present, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

I am pleased to welcome you to today's hearing on "The Hurricanes in Haiti: Disaster and Recovery." This has been an extraordinarily difficult year for Haiti. From food riots, to a lengthy inability to select a prime minister, and, most recently, to the devastation by four hurricanes and tropical storms, Fay, Gustav, Hannah, and Ike, Haiti deserves a break, to say the least.

The devastation from these storms has been massive. To date, more than 420 people have been killed by the storms and flooding, more than 10,000 dwellings have been destroyed, and more than 151,000 people have been displaced from their homes. Aid agencies in Haiti are warning of severe outbreaks of disease as thousands of people remain in squalid, cramped shelters.

Relief workers in Gonaives, which was hit the hardest by the storms, have struggled to reach thousands of people who fled to higher ground. Because the hurricanes brought down bridges, 30% of Gonaives remains inaccessible, making approach only possible by helicopter and boat. Houses in Gonaives which were not destroyed by the wind, rains, and flooding were swamped under two to three feet of mud. In several regions, agriculture has been left in ruins, leaving hundreds of thousands in need of food, water, emergency housing, and health services for at least the next six months. The disaster has compounded an already difficult situation for the new government of Prime Minister Michelle Pierre-Louis and further demonstrated the fragility of Haiti's physical and social infrastructure.

According to the U.N. Special Envoy for Haiti, Hedi Annabi, "This is a humanitarian catastrophe of a scale that is beyond the capacity of the government, [or] of the UN stabilization mission here. It requires an exceptional effort from bilateral donors, from those countries in the region, or beyond, that have the kind of assets that are required to deal with such an emergency."

Even before the most recent emergency, the United States already had a very large aid program in Haiti. This year alone, we are providing more than \$270 million in assistance, including \$45 million in food aid in response to the crisis of earlier in the year.

However, given the scale of the recent calamity, it was obvious that more help was urgently needed. The U.S. is now delivering almost \$30 million in additional emergency aid, and the USS Kearsarge, a large deck helicopter carrier, is anchored off the coast of Gonaives with large helicopters delivering provisions.

MINUSTAH, the United Nations peacekeeping mission, is doing what it can to preserve the peace and maintain order, but it won't be able to keep the lid on forever if people have nothing to eat. As of September 17, a total of 1,042 metric tons of emergency food commodities had been distributed to more than 245,000 people – and while that is notable, it quite simply is **not** enough.

At this Subcommittee's hearing one week ago, International Crisis Group Senior Vice President and Special Advisor on Latin America Mark Schneider cautioned that while the U.N. is calling for \$100 million in immediate life-saving relief aid, "a massive recovery and reconstruction plan is required and likely to cost closer to \$1 billion." This would involve repairing, rebuilding and refurbishing the economic infrastructure, schools, and health clinics, making up for lost harvests, and replacing irrigation systems and farm-to-market roads. A herculean task, no doubt.

Since one more storm might just be enough to push Haiti over the edge, we must do more. Given that these types of catastrophes are happening in Haiti with unfortunate regularity, the international community needs not only to have a plan in place to manage a future crisis, but we must preposition stocks of food and other supplies in the region. I am interested to learn from our government witnesses today what we are doing to prepare for the next crisis.

Along those lines, we need to help Haiti reforest the hillsides right away, so the next tropical storm does not create the intense flooding the previous four have. By focusing on the most problematic watersheds with labor intensive reforestation, we could take three key steps at the same time: environmental restoration, flood minimization, and unemployment reduction.

It is my hope that the Subcommittee will explore many of these questions today. I am particularly looking forward to hearing the reports of my colleagues who have particular expertise and years of experience working to help Haiti. I urge the Administration officials who will soon be testifying to consider carefully what they have to say.

I am also looking forward to the testimony by the Administration to learn more about our relief efforts and how we are working to avert, but at the same time planning for, the next crisis. Given US disaster relief efforts in Central America after Hurricane Mitch and our past efforts in Haiti and the Caribbean, I would also like to hear from the Administration why we are not quite as prepared to deal with the current disaster as we should be. Finally, our third panel will certainly round out our view of the crisis with an elected official's sense of the impact on the Haitian American community.

With that, I would like to call on the Ranking Member, Mr. Burton, for his opening statement.