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TESTIMONY

Reconstructing Haiti

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-339

January 2010

Testimony presented before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 28, 2010

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***Reconstructing Haiti*²**

Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

January 28, 2010

In considering how best to help Haiti recover from the January 12 earthquake, it is important to recognize that one now has an international disaster relief operation superimposed on top of a preexisting post-conflict reconstruction mission. The earlier of these two operations began in 2004, when American and then United Nations troops assumed responsibility for security in Haiti.

Of the two operations, humanitarian relief is clearly the more urgent, but post conflict stabilization and reconstruction is ultimately the more important. One intends to restore Haiti, the other to transform it.

The ultimate aim of any post conflict mission is to leave behind a society better able to look after itself. Usually this means the ability to manage political domestic competition in ways that do not spill over into violent conflict. In Haiti's case, the objective must also be to improve that society's capacity to deal with the sort of natural disaster that, given this country's location, will continue to strike with some regularity.

In trying to help fix a failed or failing state, one must begin by analyzing the sources of fragility. The earthquake demonstrated the weakness of Haiti's infrastructure. It also highlighted the weakness of its governing institutions. This is the true source of Haiti's vulnerability to conflict and to natural disaster. In Haiti's case, state building, rather than nation-building is the more apt description of our mission.

The history of prior American and international interventions in Haiti must instill a sense of caution regarding the prospects for any transformation. Yet as a candidate for such assistance, Haiti has many advantages over other fragile states, including ones where the nation or state building process has yielded positive results. Most of those states were surrounded by conflict prone and

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predatory neighbors. Haiti sits in the midst of a zone of peace and relative prosperity. All of its neighbors are much richer, and none have any interest in destabilizing Haiti or inhibiting its development. Neither is Haiti divided by competing ethnic or religious groups. Haitians have a strong sense of national identity, and no serious sectarian divides. Haiti also has a large and relatively prosperous diaspora, many of whom are located at no great distance and enjoy frequent contact with their families on the island.

So Haiti does have certain inherent advantages. In addition, there are three newer factors which provide some hope that future efforts to help Haiti can yield more enduring results than those of the past.

First, the final departure of ex-President Aristide in 2004 has greatly diminished partisan rancor in both Port-au-Prince and Washington. At a moment when Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are campaigning together for relief to Haiti, one may hope that this American divide, which so hobbled American efforts to help Haiti in the past, has definitively closed.

Second, the outpouring of sympathy for Haiti as a result of the recent earthquake seems likely to yield a substantial increase in American and international aid levels. More money means more assistance and also more leverage to promote change.

Finally, the very immensity of the recent disaster has administered a shock to the Haitian political structure that can help ease resistance to reform and undermine longstanding barriers to progress.

My personal experience with Haiti dates back to the American intervention of 1994. This was one of five such nation-building operations with which I became associated, beginning with Somalia earlier in that decade, and ending with Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. Since leaving government, we at RAND have issued a series of studies looking at the results of post conflict stabilization and reconstruction missions across each of these American led interventions, plus a larger number of UN led operations. Based on this body of work, I offer the following suggested guidelines for future aid to Haiti.

First, security is an essential prerequisite to reform, as it is to private investment. In the absence of security, any positive changes will eventually be washed away. Fortunately, Haiti is not a difficult society to secure. Contrary to the popular image, the Haitian population is neither heavily armed, nor inclined to violence. One has only to regard the patience with which the people of Port-au-Prince has awaited succor over the past two weeks to recognize its essentially peaceful

nature. Haiti is no Somalia, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The comparative docility of the population is, in fact, one reason why very small numbers of armed men have on occasion been able to threaten the state and overturn governments. In 2004, for instance, Aristide was driven out of office by an insurgency numbering in the very low hundreds, equipped with nothing but small arms.

American troops are, therefore, unlikely to be required once the immediate humanitarian emergency passes. Securing Haiti should be well within the capability of the current UN peacekeeping force, modestly strengthened as it is being to help cope with the new, post earthquake challenges. Nevertheless, the United States can and should help the UN in this task by assigning an increased number of American police to the UN international police contingent. In doing so, the United States should draw, in particular, on Creole speaking Haitian American policemen from places like Miami and New York.

Second, stabilization and reconstruction operations take time. The 1994 American-led international intervention was a case in point. That operation was almost entirely successful in its own terms, but those terms were much too narrow. In launching the intervention, President Clinton promised to restore a freely elected President and then to keep American troops in Haiti only long enough to organize new elections, inaugurate a new President, parliament and local officials. He promised to do this all within the space of two years. This his administration preceded to do, hitting every benchmark, achieving every target, and suffering almost no casualties in the process. But two years was too short a time to fix a society as troubled as Haiti's. In the end the 1994 intervention accomplished little of lasting value.

Recent post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction operations have been lasting eight to ten years. The current effort in Haiti began in 2004, but the country has since suffered devastating flood damage and now the earthquake. The clock on this operation therefore needs to be set back to zero hour, and the UN Security Council should plan on keeping a peacekeeping force in Haiti for another eight to ten years.

Third, in a post-conflict environment, economic development and political reform programs need to be evaluated not just on their potential to promote growth and social justice, but for their capacity to ease tensions in the society and promote reconciliation between long hostile groups. In Haiti, these competing groups are not ethnic or religious but rather economic and social. Programs that might exacerbate such tensions should be scrapped or adjusted, in favor of those that draw competing groups into collaboration, even where the immediate economic payoff of such programs may be less. This means that programs to relieve poverty and create jobs will be a necessary part of any larger aid effort, even if their immediate impact is ephemeral, for without

such visible signs of progress, significant elements of the population may be inclined to block longer term, larger pay off efforts at reform.

Fourth, assistance should be focused on building a more competent and efficient state. Haiti's vulnerability to natural disaster is not just a matter of weak building codes and poor infrastructure, but more fundamentally the result of having an exceptionally weak state that cannot provide even minimal public services – security, power, water, health and education – to the vast majority of its people. Haiti is, for instance, the only state in the entire Western Hemisphere that does not provide free primary education to most of its children.

The urgency of the immediate crisis requires that donor countries themselves provide people with food, water, medicine and shelter, bypassing the Haitian state. As we move beyond this emergency relief phase, the next priority will be to repair the country's most basic infrastructure – hospitals, schools, roads, electricity, telephones and government buildings. But these institutions should not be rebuilt on the old, inefficient, corrupt foundations. Rather the scale of this disaster offers the opportunity to accelerate long planned, oft delayed reforms in each of these sectors.

The port of Port-au-Prince has, for instance, long had the highest cost per ton in the hemisphere despite having the lowest wage rate. We should help rebuild this port, but not with the same grossly inefficient management and distorted cost structure. The same goes for the education ministry, the electric company, the telephone monopoly, the health ministry and the court system. Repair or replace the buildings, by all means, but also insist upon fundamental reforms in the management of these institutions.

Large amounts of American and other donor money will flow into Haiti in coming weeks. The temptation will be to spend most of it on American and foreign NGOs that can deliver essential services with fair reliability and good accountability, which Western legislators insist upon. But this sort of aid leaves behind no lasting local capacity to sustain those services. The second priority will be on bricks and mortar construction. This too will leave the underlying Haitian institutions unaltered. Such aid should, thus, be oriented to the extent possible on enhancing Haiti's capacity to govern. This means providing the Haitian government the wherewithal to hire well qualified staff at competitive wages, and programs to further train such staff and provide them the information systems and other support services needed to maximize their efficiency.

Fifth, the Haitian state should be built from the bottom up as well as the top down. This means assistance to mayors and local councils, and funding which will allow key government agencies to establish a presence beyond Port-au-Prince. For decades the population has moved off the land

and into the big cities, particularly the capital. This exodus has now, as a result of the earthquake, been reversed. Assistance efforts should be designed to help those who have left the city to find a livelihood in the countryside, rather than return to the shanty towns from whence they have fled.

Sixth, the U.S. government needs to organize itself for a sustained high intensity effort to promote these reforms. The President and Secretary of State should invest a single individual with authority and responsibility for Haiti comparable to that Ambassador Richard Holbrook currently exercises for Afghanistan. Congress should authorize and appropriate new money for Haiti not in the usual categories of development assistance, security assistance, counternarcotics assistance, refugee assistance, etc., but in a single account unencumbered by earmarks and special limitations, and then work through the consultative and oversight processes with whomever the Administration designates as its point person to ensure that this money is carefully targeted and well spent.

Seventh, it is important that the international program to reform Haitian institutions not bear a made-in-Washington imprint. Large-scale international assistance will carry with it significant leverage to promote change, but this pressure needs to be exerted in a carefully calibrated manner. Candidate programs for reform need to be carefully chosen, local champions identified and empowered, local opponents co-opted, politicians lobbied and the public informed. The United Nations and the World Bank, the two major international institutions most heavily engaged in Haiti should be out in front, choosing and designing the necessary reforms and conditioning assistance on their achievement. The United Nations should continue to lead in reforming the security sector, to include police, courts and prisons, and in supporting elections and promoting political reform. The World Bank should assume leadership throughout the economic and social sphere, identifying the key changes needed and setting the conditions for assistance. The United States should work in concert with the other key donors, particularly Canada, France and the European Union, forming a small core group to quietly help the UN and the World Bank define their reform objectives and then working largely behind the scenes to ensure these objectives are achieved. The United States should contribute directly to UN and World Bank funds for Haiti, and should make sure that its own bilateral programs, and those of other donors contribute to, rather than undercut the reform programs set out by these institutions.

Finally, there are a couple of things that the United States is uniquely positioned to do by reason of its proximity to Haiti. These involve trade and immigration.

In 2006 Congress passed legislation providing Haiti uniquely generous but time limited access to the U.S. market. As with the UN peacekeeping mission, the time clock on this access should be

set back to zero, recognizing that the earthquake has more than swept away whatever had been accomplished since these preferences originally went into effect.

The United States should also consider temporarily raising its annual quota for Haitian immigration. Haitian society may be economically dysfunctional, but Haitian immigrants have, quite to the contrary, proved to be hard working, family oriented, law abiding contributors to our society, even as they are one of the largest sources of support for those they leave behind in Haiti. Every dollar that they remit to relatives in Haiti is another dollar that does not need to come from the U.S. taxpayer. Expanding legal Haitian immigration thus seems a classic win-win proposition.

The current crisis, though tragic, offers the chance to boost Haiti out of decades of poverty and misrule. A successful strategy for doing so will require several elements: care in the design, sustained U.S. commitment, effective international coordination, and, above all, a focus on strengthening Haiti's governing institutions.