

Welcome Dinner in Honor of the Ambassador Kenneth Merten
Haitian-American Chamber of Commerce
Port-au-Prince
October 19, 2009

(As Delivered)

I would like to thank the American Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event in my honor this evening. As most of you know this is my third posting to Haiti and my wife Susan, daughters Caryl and Elisabeth and I are delighted to be here again. We feel as if we have returned to a much loved home. After serving my first diplomatic assignment as Consular Officer here 22 years ago and 10 years ago as the Economic Counselor, standing here now as the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti is a real honor. The U.S. Embassy and the HAMCham have a long history of friendship and an excellent working relationship. I enjoyed working with you before and look forward to working with you again now.

If we are going to get Haiti to where Haiti wants to be, there is a lot of hard work to be done. That work is heavy, too heavy for just one person, one group or one government. Everyone must help.

I have suggested that the terms of this work engagement must be: **Respect, Partnership and Responsibility**. I believe these are not only the axes for the U.S.-Haiti relationship, but for Haiti and all its international and domestic partners.

Respect can be demonstrated in many ways. With regard to our relationship between the Embassy and the HAMCham I see it as recognizing the accomplishments and important role of each partner. Some of you here have told me that they believe the private sector has evolved and matured. I share that assessment and I congratulate you on this growth. I challenge you to assume an even bigger role in the economic development of Haiti. Creating opportunities in Haiti – creating hope in the future -- cannot happen without a vibrant private sector.

The private sector needs to continue to work respectfully with the Haitian government, so they can be included in policy decisions. A climate of mutual respect will build trust between the government and the private sector. The final On The Frontier (OTF) Competitiveness Report, funded by HAMCham, USAID and the Haitian Presidency, is a great example of the private and public sector working together in respect, and also in partnership.

Partnership between international donors and the Haitian people is essential. The international community has renewed its focus and commitment to Haiti, but Haiti and Haitians cannot afford to have a dependence mentality. Haiti must take this opportunity to participate as a full partner – and a leader -- in this effort.

I also call on the different sectors of Haitian society to also work as partners. It is vitally important for Haitian society to have broad consensus on the most important aspects of its national strategy for development. An inclusive, democratic process – as slow and difficult as it may seem in the present -- will ultimately yield the best long-term decisions for Haiti. There have been frustrating setbacks, but perhaps the expression “Bite pa tonbe” says it best. The effort to find solutions everyone can support is worth it.

The U.S. Embassy is not here to make decisions for Haiti. This does not mean that the United States will not help. Our commitment to assist development and help build democracy remains strong, but the democratically elected leaders of Haiti are ultimately responsible.

The State Department and USAID are currently reviewing our past and current assistance in Haiti, so that we can be more effective partners in Haiti’s recovery and economic growth efforts. This review is being guided by three principles:

First, our assistance should cultivate, not be a substitute, for permanent capacity on the part of the Haitian Government and its citizens. We want to promote economic and social development that Haiti can sustain on its own, independent of foreign aid.

Second, we want to measure our results and make them more accessible to the public. This way, our programs can be more easily evaluated and kept in line with the priorities of the Haitian Government.

Third, we agree with the Government of Haiti, the UN and others that the donors need to improve our joint efforts to coordinate. Our objective is to deliver assistance that will complement – in an intelligent, well-targeted way – the resources of other donors and of the Haitian Government.

The United States Government also continues to assist potential and current U.S. investors in Haiti, whose projects may mean billions of dollars of investment. There are projects being funded by the U.S. Government, through USAID, to help the Haitian Diaspora invest in Haiti. This help includes technical assistance and financing to match a serious investor’s funds. We continue to liaise with the various Haitian Chambers of Commerce, especially the American Chamber of Commerce, in support of small and medium enterprises.

The HOPE II program – which allows Haiti to manufacture and export clothing to the U.S. duty-free – helps create jobs in Haiti. These are jobs that help Haitians feed their families and start to build a life.

I want to emphasize this: The future is not in cheap labor, but in skilled labor. Therefore, the U.S. is supporting training. The Haiti Apparel Center will train 2000 workers in how to be more effective workers and managers over the next year, beginning with 70 in December. We are also training trainers, who will keep transmitting new skills to workers, and improving access to industrial zones.

HOPE II has just been recertified by the White House, because conditions for its continued success are being met, such as labor standards.

We are optimistic about the outlook for the textile sector. We expect that the total export levels will increase this year over last, despite the world and U.S. economic downturn, and that HOPE II factories will also increase.

Finally, the third pillar of a successful approach is **Responsibility**. During the recent Inter-American Development Bank Business Forum and earlier at the April 2009 Haiti Donor's Conference, Prime Minister Pierre-Louis thanked the international community for their generous commitments of time and money. She emphasized that Haiti would move forward by being accountable for its actions. I agree.

"Of those to whom much is given, much is expected." These words, spoken by President John F. Kennedy, are actually from the Bible. They have been words to live by for generations of great leaders, both famous and obscure.

These words are very applicable to Haiti at the moment, I believe. The business community in Haiti should be proud of its accomplishments, based on hard work. I am reminded of the fact that at least one company represented here, Mathias Pierre's GaMa ("GAH-ma"), was recently recognized as one of the best of the small and medium enterprises in Haiti and the Caribbean region.

Pursuing equitable economic development is not a zero sum game – someone does not have to lose for someone else to win. I am convinced that business leaders such as you can make a profit while still doing the right thing for Haiti. There must be an environment free of corruption and where conditions favor fair business practices. Former President Clinton noted in his keynote address to potential investors at the IDB forum that economic growth in Haiti will mean that the rich may get richer but also that many of the poor will move into the middle class.

Haiti still has a great deal of work to do to achieve that type of environment. Manageable risks will have to be taken; some sacrifices and difficult choices will have to be made. Some of you – you, to whom much has been given -- will be expected to lead this movement.

It is extremely important for the Haitian Government and private sector to work together to develop sensible regulatory and other changes that will make it easier for investors to come to Haiti.

Responsibility also entails promoting others. Haiti's youth is its best asset. Unfortunately, many young people don't see a bright future for them here in Haiti. You can invest in this next generation of workers and leaders, by working with Haitian educational institutions to fund training and provide internships. The Haitian government can help give them hope by nurturing a business-friendly climate.

“Of those to whom much is given, much is expected.” I would like to highlight and personally congratulate Comcel/Voila and their Executive Director and HAMCham Board Member, Bernard Fils-Aime on being a finalist for the prestigious Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence. This award recognizes American companies that embrace and practice corporate responsibility. Through numerous projects and programs Comcel/Viola contributes significantly to the improvement of living conditions of the Haitian population. They are a wonderful example of an organization practicing the responsibility of which I speak. We wish them the best, when the winners are announced in December.

Haiti finds itself in a propitious moment. The international community and investors are interested because Haiti has a dedicated president, a talented prime minister, and parliament that is playing its role responsibly, and a private sector that has matured. To lose any of these elements would risk putting Haiti off the path towards development and prosperity. I cannot speak for others in the international community, but the United States believes that the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections are key. They need to happen quickly and with credibility. We will do our part to support them.

We all know the road ahead is not easy. Honestly, democracy is messy. Building a good economy is enormously difficult. But I applaud you for your contributions, and I encourage you to keep working on the lines of action we have started.

Continue to fight corruption. The people in this room need to lead and fight a battle from the front. You are the example that others will follow.

Pursue public/private partnerships. There are important ways in which we can combine government and private money to create more jobs and meet urgent development needs.

Work to create a business-friendly environment with streamlined laws and paperwork for yourselves and others, with the assistance necessary to attract and welcome more businesses here. Prime Minister Pierre Louis ended her remarks at the IDB forum with this declaration. “Haiti is now open for business.” I could not agree more.

I repeat: Haiti finds itself in a propitious moment. I am very optimistic. Please take full advantage of this tremendous opportunity – this historic moment. I do not believe Haiti has a minute to waste in seizing this opportunity. The private sector needs to develop and deepen its relationship with the government – both the executive and the legislative branches and vice versa. The political class must put aside personal and party agendas and work together for the Haitian people. One reason we have this moment of opportunity is because of the stability Haiti has enjoyed these past few years, thanks in large part to the astute leadership of President Preval, but with the participation of others as well. The international community and potential investors were discouraged from coming to Haiti these last twenty years because of instability and insecurity.

I believe that most Haitian officials in the legislative and executive branches realize what is at stake and will continue to work for political stability. I hope I am not wrong, because what is at stake is something precious: the future of the Haitian people.

The U.S. Embassy is ready to work closely with you to build a strong, peaceful and prosperous Haiti. As an old friend of Haiti, I will do all I can to make sure the United States plays its part in helping Haiti reach its full potential.

I look forward to working with you again. Thank you.