

## Written Testimony of Austin K. Holmes

Before the United States Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Schatz, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify on the humanitarian and security crisis in Haiti and to provide a practical framework for mid-term stabilization. I appreciate this Subcommittee's leadership in addressing a crisis that has both humanitarian and strategic implications for the United States, and your concern for Haiti – a country I've given the greater part of two decades to serve.

I began my work in Haiti in 2009 and was most recently in country last week, supporting the relocation of my foster son to Cap-Haïtien. Since the 2010 earthquake, I have deployed to every major disaster affecting Haiti, managing humanitarian logistics for local and U.S.-based faith organizations in support of USAID, and frequently coordinating U.S. government defense-related engagement in response operations. Immediately following Haiti's 2021 magnitude 7.2 earthquake, I supported Joint Task Force Haiti under Rear Admiral Keith Davids, working with U.S. military to facilitate a humanitarian disaster and relief operation that executed approximately:

- 21 Missions (MiTaMs);
- 59 Lifts / Sorties;
- Over 250 MEDEVACs;
- 1 Landing Craft Unit (LCU) delivery into Jérémie;
- 18 unique helicopter delivery locations; and
- 370,070 total pounds of USAID relief aid transported.

In the years immediately following the 2010 earthquake, I spent approximately twenty-five days per month in Haiti, before relocating my family full-time to the country from 2017 to 2019. During that period, I built and led a Haitian staff of nearly 900 personnel, overseeing one of the largest private education networks in the country, and feeding more than 100,000 children daily through a national school network known as HaitiOne. That Haitian-led team continues to operate today under extraordinarily difficult conditions, currently providing daily meals to more than 130,000 children. This is executed through a decentralized warehouse and logistics network, and local organizations.

I returned to the United States as organized gangs began consolidating control in Port-au-Prince, at a time when negotiating passage through checkpoints to safely remove my children from school had become routine. In 2023, at the guidance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I established a specialized security company with the help of my co-founder, former Delta Force operator, Marine, Navy Cross recipient Taylor Jolly, to support high-risk recovery operations during the successful negotiation and recovery of a U.S. military veteran kidnapped in Haiti. Since that time, I have been asked to advise and lead kidnapping negotiations involving both Haitian nationals and U.S. citizens, and have supported the rescue, extraction, or recovery of hundreds of individuals under extreme conditions.

This testimony draws on my direct, on-the-ground experience in Haiti. Its purpose is to describe current conditions in a manner consistent with the interests of the Haitian people and the national, regional, and strategic interests of the United States; to explain why those conditions warrant the attention of this Subcommittee; to outline a feasible mid-term humanitarian stabilization approach; and to assess the costs and risks of continued inaction.

This testimony does not advocate for large-scale military intervention, nor does it seek to replace existing U.S. or multilateral efforts. Rather, it proposes a complementary, focused, time-bound, and cost-

disciplined approach designed to stabilize humanitarian conditions with and for the Haitian people, protect U.S. interests, reduce long-term costs, and accelerate a pathway toward sustained Haitian leadership and prosperity.

### **Current Conditions: A Country in Systemic Collapse**

Haiti is no longer experiencing a short-term emergency. It is in sustained systemic collapse. An estimated 6.4 million people<sup>[1]</sup>—more than half the population—require emergency humanitarian assistance in 2026, a 6.7 percent increase over the prior year. Nearly 5.9 million face acute food insecurity<sup>[2]</sup>, with close to two million at emergency levels and thousands at famine-level risk. Haiti is now one of only five countries globally classified at catastrophic hunger levels<sup>[3]</sup>. Over one million children face life-threatening malnutrition<sup>[4]</sup>. The scale is staggering, and the conditions are worsening.

Armed groups now control an estimated 90 percent of Port-au-Prince—where approximately 30% of Haiti's population resides—and have expanded into the Artibonite, Centre, and Northwest departments. Between January and September 2025, criminal groups killed 4,384 people, injured 1,899, and kidnapped 491<sup>[5]</sup>, with at least 13 documented massacres<sup>[5]</sup> across three departments. Violence intensified in the final months of 2025 and has spread well beyond the capital<sup>[6]</sup>, with 69 percent of recorded displacement movements now occurring outside Port-au-Prince<sup>[1]</sup>. Internal displacement has doubled in one year to 1.4 million people<sup>[6]</sup>—twelve percent of the entire population—including over 500,000 children<sup>[7]</sup>.

The health system is in advanced collapse. Only 20 to 40 percent of health facilities remain functional<sup>[8]</sup>, and fewer than 10 percent of hospitals are operating at full capacity. 1,600 schools closed during the 2024-2025 academic year<sup>[6]</sup>, depriving 1.5 million children of education. The UN's 2026 Humanitarian Response Plan seeks \$880 million<sup>[6]</sup> to assist 4.2 million people, yet current programs remain less than 10 percent funded<sup>[1]</sup>, effectively paralyzing the ability of humanitarian organizations to operate at scale. While some private NGOs have continued to operate and find creative pathways to sustain limited operations, the contraction of larger, publicly funded programs has shifted an outsized burden onto these organizations—many of which lack the resources necessary to meet the rapidly expanding gap between capacity and humanitarian need.

### **The Devastating Impact on Women and Girls**

Armed groups routinely deploy sexual violence as a deliberate tool of intimidation and territorial control. Between January and September 2025, the UN documented 1,270 cases of sexual violence<sup>[5]</sup>, the vast majority committed by criminal armed groups. UNICEF reported a 1,000 percent increase in sexual violence against children<sup>[7]</sup> between 2023 and 2024. In 2024 alone, 6,500 cases of gender-based violence were reported<sup>[9]</sup>, with another 1,250 in just the first two months of 2025. Survivors have little to no access to protection or services<sup>[5]</sup>—and conditions continue to worsen.

The consequences extend far beyond the violence itself. Institutional maternal mortality has climbed from 250 to 350 per 100,000 live births<sup>[10]</sup> as health facilities have shuttered and funding for maternal care has evaporated. An estimated one million women-headed households face acute food insecurity<sup>[11]</sup>. In displacement camps, 8 percent of women have resorted to transactional sex at least once<sup>[12]</sup> to meet basic needs, and over 20 percent report knowing someone who has. Nearly 47 percent of all women and girls in Haiti now require humanitarian aid<sup>[11]</sup>. The erosion of safety, health care, and economic opportunity for women and girls is not a secondary effect of Haiti's crisis. It is central to it.

### **Why Haiti Matters to U.S. Interests**

Haiti's instability poses a direct and escalating threat to U.S. national security and broader regional stability. Prolonged disorder less than 700 miles from the Florida coast has created permissive conditions for transnational criminal networks to expand trafficking operations involving narcotics, illicit finance, weapons, and ammunition across the Caribbean basin. Haiti's geography, porous borders, limited

maritime enforcement capacity, and governance vacuum have increasingly positioned it as a strategic transit hub within these criminal networks.

This dynamic was underscored by the 2025 seizure of 1.05 metric tons of cocaine in Haitian waters, the largest interdiction in more than three decades, highlighting Haiti's growing role in hemispheric drug trafficking routes. At the same time, the continued flow of illicit firearms and ammunition—predominantly of U.S. origin—has fueled gang violence inside Haiti, reinforcing a cycle of insecurity that destabilizes Haiti while simultaneously amplifying criminal threats to the U.S. Haiti's Finance Minister estimates between \$60-\$75 million is being made by Haiti's primary gang network off of extortion of shipments from the Dominican Republic alone, in addition to taxes gangs are placing on Haitians selling goods at market, and enforcing tolls across main highways<sup>[13]</sup>. Left unaddressed, these converging trafficking flows risk further entrenching and enriching organized criminal networks with direct consequences for U.S. border security, public safety, and regional enforcement efforts.

Migration pressures are intensifying. Haiti's 1.4 million internally displaced people represent the highest figure ever recorded<sup>[14]</sup>, and history tells us what comes next. During the 1991-1994 crisis, 38,000 Haitians were intercepted at sea within six months<sup>[14]</sup>, with 300,000 displaced internally. Today's displacement is already four times that scale. The Dominican Republic conducted over 150,000 deportations of Haitians in just the first five months of 2025<sup>[15]</sup>, signaling the strain on regional neighbors. The U.S. and Dominican Republic remain the two primary destinations for fleeing Haitian migrants. Absent stabilization, the costs to U.S. border, asylum, and immigration enforcement systems will compound.

Haiti remains one of 12 countries maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, yet China continues to court Haitian leaders as part of a “charm offensive” – offering financial assistance and infrastructure financing to Haitian leaders, as well as concessional and interest-free loans in exchange for Haiti's adoption of the One China Principle. China has established an Office of Commercial Development of the People's Republic of China in Haiti. Without appropriate U.S. intervention, China will continue to expand its control and influence in Haiti.

### **The U.S. and International Funding Crisis: What Has Been Lost**

This Subcommittee has direct oversight of the programs that have historically served as America's primary tools for addressing the crisis in Haiti. The disruption of those tools has materially worsened conditions on the ground. The January 2025 executive order and subsequent stop-work directives froze approximately \$330 million in outstanding U.S. commitments<sup>[17]</sup> to ongoing programs. Approximately 80 percent of U.S.-funded programs were suddenly halted<sup>[10]</sup>.

The consequences have been severe and measurable. Community health centers co-funded by the U.S. have closed. HIV/AIDS programs serving 35,000 patients have been disrupted, with antiretroviral supplies uncertain beyond six months<sup>[18]</sup>. UNICEF was able to treat only 4,600 children for severe acute malnutrition—just 3.6 percent of the 129,000 expected to need treatment<sup>[10]</sup>. School feeding, cash-for-work, nutrition, and food voucher programs have been drastically cut or ended entirely. The UN World Food Program (WFP) estimates it needs \$139 million over the next 12 months<sup>[2]</sup> to reach the most vulnerable families. In total, international food agencies face a funding shortfall of more than \$230 million<sup>[19]</sup> for emergency actions through year-end.

There is an additional structural concern. Analysis of USAID spending in Haiti reveals that only 7.6 percent of funding went directly to local organizations<sup>[20]</sup>, while 40 percent flowed to UN agencies<sup>[20]</sup>. The effectiveness of U.S. humanitarian dollars in Haiti can be significantly improved by channeling resources through proven, locally-rooted, community and faith-based organizations with established supply chains, indigenous leadership, and the cultural fluency to operate in high-risk environments—organizations that

are already feeding children, running clinics, managing security risks, and maintaining logistics networks while larger institutions remain paralyzed. These mechanisms are proven to be more resilient, cost-effective, and sustainable when public funding expands existing private initiatives. Flipping the status quo to instead allocate 90% of funding to local organizations in the field will significantly expand the return for U.S. investment in Haiti.

### **A Mid-Term Humanitarian Stabilization Framework**

Addressing Haiti's crisis requires bridging the gap between short-term relief and longer-term political and security solutions. A mid-term humanitarian stabilization effort would operate over several years toward a targeted, finite objective of safeguarding the free flow of . The goal is disaster and risk containment, not nation-building. It would restore minimum conditions for humanitarian access and civilian protection while arresting further systemic collapse. That foundation would allow diplomatic, governance, and security efforts to gain traction as we work to speed Haiti along the aid-to-trade pathway.

Several principles should guide this approach. Speed and adaptability are essential because conditions in Haiti change rapidly. Cost discipline is also critical as resources must be directed toward actions that produce measurable improvements. Lastly, implementation should rely on proven, experienced, and trusted entities capable of operating in high-risk humanitarian environments. And accountability must be built in from the start.

A feasible integrated security and humanitarian response strategy, developed by CaribbeanOne, a coalition of faith-based and non-profit local organizations with decades of combined experience in Haiti should include four sequential phases:

- **First**, securing humanitarian corridors to enable aid delivery and commerce;
- **Second**, activating emergency food and clean water distribution, as well as medical care, through those corridors;
- **Third**, restoring essential services and stimulating local economic recovery; and
- **Fourth**, transitioning operations to Haitian institutions and multilateral agencies.

The plan begins implementation in the areas farthest from Port-au-Prince and progresses incrementally toward the capital, prioritizing regions where stabilization is immediately achievable. Critical to the success of this plan will be coordination with local community organizations, law enforcement, and civil society to enhance and ensure the last mile remains the most important mile.

CaribbeanOne would advance such a framework and already operates 630 program centers across Haiti, feeding over 130,000 children daily. It leads a network of over 500 NGOs with real-time needs assessment, logistics, and rapid deployment capabilities. The security component is Haitian-led, emphasizing democratic oversight, sovereignty, and capacity-building rather than indefinite foreign reliance. The model is designed to be scalable, cost-effective, and accountable—and it is ready to deploy.

### **The Cost of American Inaction**

Delay is not neutrality. It is a decision with predictable, compounding, and devastating consequences. Humanitarian needs will continue to escalate, driving higher emergency costs over time. Migration pressures will intensify, placing additional strain on U.S. border and asylum systems at a moment when those systems are already under extraordinary pressure. Armed groups and criminal networks will entrench further, raising the eventual human and monetary costs of any stabilization effort. Left unaddressed, this vacuum will be exploited by U.S. adversaries and transnational criminal actors, resulting in the loss of U.S. strategic influence less than 700 miles from the American coast and materially increasing the long-term security and financial costs to the United States.

The U.S. has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Haiti's security over the past two decades with no durable return. Washington funded and championed the Multinational Security Support mission, which to date has not produced a measurable reduction in gang violence<sup>[21]</sup> — in fact the situation significantly worsened in 2025. The recently authorized Gang Suppression Force is a necessary kinetic tool, but does not address the humanitarian emergency. Decades of U.S. security investments without parallel humanitarian stabilization have not produced lasting results. This committee has the authority to change that pattern.

Inaction also reduces U.S. leverage. As conditions deteriorate, options narrow. Interventions that could be limited and cost-effective today become more complex and expensive later. Failures to reestablish government control and rebuild government institutions in Haiti allows a trafficking superhighway into the U.S., a narco-state aligned with foreign adversaries in our near abroad, and a refugee and humanitarian crisis that dwarfs anything this hemisphere has recently experienced.

### **Recommendations for the Subcommittee**

I respectfully urge this Subcommittee to consider the following actions within your jurisdiction.

- **First**, direct a portion of State and Foreign Operations funding towards establishment of humanitarian corridors through proven, locally-led organizations in Haiti that have demonstrated the ability to operate at scale in high-insecurity environments, prioritizing entities with existing supply chains and indigenous leadership.
- **Second**, require that future appropriations for Haiti include dedicated funding for gender-based violence response, maternal health services, and protection programs for displaced women and children.
- **Third**, support the development of integrated humanitarian-security corridor models that pair secure access routes with immediate food, clean water, medical, and education delivery.
- **Fourth**, mandate regular reporting on the status of U.S.-funded humanitarian programs in Haiti, including the disposition of previously frozen commitments and the effectiveness of current spending channels.

Haiti's trajectory remains influenceable, but the window for cost-effective action is narrowing. Every week of delay means more children starving, more women assaulted, more families displaced, and more pressure on American borders and systems. A mid-term humanitarian stabilization approach offers a practical, disciplined way to reduce civilian suffering, protect U.S. interests, and preserve options for longer-term solutions.

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