

Haitian CIVIL Society Orgs.
Port-au-Prince, Haiti
November 21, 1998

**Remarks of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to
Representatives of Haitian Civil Society Organizations
Residence of the U.S. Ambassador, Port-au-Prince, Republic of Haiti
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Thank you very much, Ambassador Carney, Mrs. Vicky Butler. I am delighted to be here at the United States Ambassador's residence. And I am especially pleased to be with Mrs. Geri Preval, who has become a friend of mine through meetings of the First Ladies of our hemisphere.

I want to thank Mrs. Yves for that beautiful embroidered tablecloth and accompanying napkins; when I finally get a house, I will make good use of that. I will also be very proud and honored to hang this magnificent work by Mr. Dodard.

This is my second visit to Haiti. My husband and I came here twenty-three years ago, shortly after we married. At that time, we bought some art, which we have taken with us everywhere we lived. And Haitian art now hangs both in the White House and Camp David. It is taken me twenty-three years to come back. My first effort, as you may know, had to be postponed because of the hurricane, but I am very pleased that I was able to return today and I will take full credit, Mr. Ambassador, for the good weather.

Haiti and the United States are closely joined in friendship and partnership, through our citizens and our shared history, as the two oldest independent nations in this hemisphere. The United States has also been blessed by the many positive contributions of Haitian-Americans.

I want first to express my sympathy on behalf of my husband and the American people for the widespread damage to agriculture, loss of property and life, suffered as a result of Hurricane Georges. Tomorrow, with Mrs. Preval, I will announce additional disaster relief aid from the United States Government, to assist the Haitian people rebuild from the hurricane.

I am especially pleased that I could meet with you, the leaders of civil society, tonight. You play a significant and increasing role in building democracy and expanding opportunity for the Haitian people. After constitutional government was restored in 1994, civil society organizations began to spring up and expand. I heard of one such group, the Union of Valiant Women, who sang a song that begins: the rain of democracy is falling, the flood of hope is running, it's time for us to organize. That is a good song not only for Haiti, but for any democracy around our world.

Over 1,400 civil society organizations have participated in USAID sponsored dialogues. You have discussed how to set goals in areas like fighting poverty, education, and economic development. I have heard that civil society organizations have promoted over 2250 local projects, and are active in over 100 of Haiti's communities. The Haitian people's victory over de facto military rule, political violence and repression is an inspiration to freedom loving people around the world. But now, as with many new democracies, you face new challenges: to strengthen the principles of democracy and the Rule of Law here in Haiti.

I have just come from visiting Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. In each country, I spoke about the importance of civil society, and the role that non governmental organizations are playing to bring people together --people who have been on the opposite sides of terrible conflicts --to build a common future. I have seen how important it is, in countries that do not yet have a long history of freedom and democratic institutions, to learn the art of political compromise and reconciliation; to understand the importance of respect for one's political opponents; and to show the willingness to engage a dialogue and conciliation. All those practices are the heart of a strong and viable democracy. My country has been practicing democracy for more than 220 years. We still face challenges. People still are required to work with other people whom they do not respect and they do not like. But we have learned that it is important to put the good of our country ahead of our personal and political beliefs.

All of you gathered here this evening have an opportunity to continue working with those inside and outside of government to bring people together, to take the necessary steps forward for all the people of Haiti. I respect the work of the civil society groups that have called for an end to the current political impasse: grassroots groups, labor organizations, and business groups like CLED have been active in encouraging resolution of the current conflict.

You have also been building bridges between the private sector and the government. Those of you who follow American politics may remember that bridges are my husband's favorite metaphors. He is always talking about building a bridge to the 21st century and building bridges of understanding between competing groups. And those of you who do follow our politics know that from time to time he has opposition to his efforts to build such bridges. But he has continued to persevere because he knows that building bridges helps to build a stronger democracy.

I also want to encourage you to continue your work in the area of judicial reform. Strengthening the Rule of Law is vital for any functioning democracy, and I am pleased that our government can assist you in these efforts.

We also have to continue to provide opportunity to the people of Haiti, and as Mrs. Preval said, we know your challenges are great: crushing poverty; high illiteracy; inadequate health care; a high incidence of domestic violence. Those are all social indicators of the problems that face Haiti as it attempts to make progress toward a better future.

But the Haitian people are known to be people of enormous spirit, strength and resourcefulness. Many of you are working with men and women, boys and girls, to improve conditions.

I want to say a special word about the particular vulnerability of women, not only in Haiti, but in many countries around the world. I want to recognize the work of COFAL, for the work you have done with women caught up in the legal system. You also recognize that education is the future not only to democracy but also to economic development. I applaud the efforts of the steering committee that has been formed to promote women's and girls' education. In study after study done around the world, the single most important investment any country can make in improving social and economic conditions is to invest in girls and women's education.

I also congratulate the Haiti task force on reproductive health and family planning. This task force serves as a model for USAID's population strategy, for its innovative and global vision in addressing Haiti's population issues. Reproductive health, family planning and women's education go together as a way of empowering and enabling women to be full participants in this society.

I also appreciate the efforts of the Haitian consultative committee of USAID's civil society project. Your contributions to the restoration of the constitutional order and the strengthening of civil society are exemplary.

I began by saying how proud the United States is for the many contributions of Haitian-Americans. Haitian-American doctors and nurses are in many of our hospitals all over our country. Haitian-American teachers are in our schools. Haitian-American military officers serve with distinction. Haitian-American business leaders are making great contributions to our economy. I do not believe that the Haitians who immigrated to America are fundamentally different from the Haitians who remained here in Haiti. The problems that Haiti faces are solvable, especially by people who have already demonstrated their dedication to freedom and their capacity for hard work.

The importance of civil society cannot be overstated. President Kennedy used to say: On this earth, God's work is our own. Alleviating poverty, providing education and health care, offering economic opportunity to men and women, all of which are aimed at creating dignity and independence for the individual person is God's work. I salute all of you for the work you are doing to strengthen democracy in Haiti, respect the human rights of all Haitians and build a future worthy of the Haitian people. Thank you all very much.