

## EDITORIAL

# Help for Haiti

A time for trade, not troops

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WHEN IT COMES to Haiti, the hemisphere's poorest country, the United States has a perverse history of being more generous with its troop deployments than its terms of trade. The time is ripe for a new approach.

For the past two years, Congress has turned a deaf ear to pleas that Washington extend trade preferences to Haitian-manufactured T-shirts, hospital scrubs and other apparel. The effect has been devastating for the nation's garment industry, once one of the few bright spots in an otherwise supine economy. Clothing assembly plants, already hit hard by the political violence of recent years, are closing nearly every month as customers move their business to Asia. A sector that once provided 100,000 jobs now employs only 12,000 to 20,000 and stands in peril of disappearing entirely.

A rescue package pending in Congress would allow duty-free access to U.S. markets for garments assembled in Haiti using fabrics from third countries. The legislation, known as the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act, also called the HOPE bill, is a modest measure; it is certainly no panacea for the Haitian economy. But apparel-making plants that close are relatively easy to reopen, and HOPE, if enacted, could help kick-start the Haitian economy by quickly getting 10,000 or more people working again. In a country as poor as Haiti, where a majority of the population survives on less than \$2 a day and four out of five adults are jobless or underemployed, those jobs would be a lifeline for thousands of families.

Predictably, HOPE is opposed by textile industry lobbyists and Southern lawmakers who are doing their bidding. But among HOPE's advocates on the House Ways and Means Committee are both the top Republican (California Rep. Bill Thomas) and the top Democrat (New York Rep. Charles B. Rangel); the bill is also backed by Haitian President Rene Preval. Timing is crucial. After two interventions by U.S. forces in the past 12 years, Haiti inaugurated a democratically elected president this year and has lately enjoyed what passes there for relative political stability. After 15 years of political turmoil, violent unrest and economic mismanagement, this looks like a rare opportunity to consolidate tentative progress in Haiti. Congress shouldn't miss it.