

# To help Haiti recover, cancel its debt

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In October, 79-year old minister David Duncombe broke a 46-day starvation fast at a prayer breakfast in Washington attended by members of Congress, African parliamentarians and religious leaders from Haiti and the United States. Duncombe led Jubilee USA's national fast urging debt cancellation for the world's most impoverished countries.

When asked why he would risk his life this way, Duncombe said he wanted lawmakers to see starvation first-hand and understand the devastating effect of debt on countries like Liberia and Haiti.

Today, the world's poorest countries spend more than \$100 million each day to service debt often previously incurred by dictators -- money they can't spend on food, education, health services and other basic needs. In turn, the United States spends billions investing in health, education and other infrastructure in these countries because these burdensome interest payments prevent them from doing so themselves.

One of these countries is Haiti, the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere. On Oct. 29, I spoke at a forum hosted by the Miami-Dade NAACP and the Jubilee USA Network ([www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org)) to build local support for two bills currently in Congress, the 2007 Jubilee Act (HR 2634) and the Haiti Resolution (HR 241). The former would cancel debt for all countries that need it to fight extreme poverty; the latter would fast-track debt cancellation for Haiti, which has faced a history of debt injustice.

The issue should be of concern to every person in Florida, not only Haitian Americans.

A self-supporting Haiti is good for Florida. The more health and prosperity in Haiti, the less anyone will need to worry about seeing another boat wash up on our shores like it did March 28 at Hallandale Beach.

One of every nine Haitian children dies before age 5; life expectancy is only 53; the vast majority of Haitians live in poverty unimaginable if you haven't experienced it.

But Haiti today must pay \$56 million annually to service \$1.3 billion in debt, more than half of which was incurred by Haiti's dictators -- \$500 million alone by the infamously corrupt Duvalier dictatorship. That's \$56 million diverted from desperately needed programs for literacy, nutrition, road-building, education, access to clean water.

When Michelle Duvalier spent \$20,000 on a shopping spree in New York and Jean Claude Duvalier was funding his Macoutes, palaces and overseas estates, the international community was silent. Must Haiti's poor continue to pay the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for loans its dictators used to kill, plunder and oppress them?

Canceling debt enables countries to increase spending on poverty reduction by 75 percent. When Zambia's debts were canceled, its spending on education increased by 130 percent, enabling 1.5 million children to return to school virtually overnight. Small amounts of debt cancellation have achieved startling results, more than doubling school enrollment in Uganda, vaccinating 500,000 children in Mozambique and adding three more years of schooling for children in Honduras.

Haiti's debt is an albatross, a form of present-day enslavement that maintains poverty and desperation -- a burden on its government, people and future.

If we want more Haitians risking their lives and landing on our shores, we will *not* cancel Haiti's debt. But we'll cancel it if we want to do what is fair, wise and needed not only for Haiti's recovery and prosperity but for our own values and welfare in Florida.

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