

The Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, Mar. 09, 2009

Bill Clinton offers Haiti encouraging words

By JACQUELINE CHARLES

jcharles@MiamiHerald.com

A smiling Bill Clinton on Monday walked up to the group of school children dressed in red and white checkered uniforms, lost in a game.

Unaware of the magnitude of the man cheering them on, they followed their teacher's instructions to jump and sing along while the former U.S. president quietly watched, smiling.

For Clinton, no words were needed to convey the importance of what he was seeing: children once so malnourished they could barely stand, now laughing and shaking their tiny hips because their hunger has been quelled by daily morning snacks and a hot meal -- courtesy of foreign donors.

From a school feeding and dry food distribution program in the sprawling slum of Cite Soleil to a scholarship program that helps college students remain in Haiti and earn a decent living, Clinton's first encounters during a two-day trip was fueled by one word: hope.

"These kids are in great shape. They have a lot of self-confidence. I am very impressed," Clinton said, after arriving at Cite Soleil in the early afternoon. "There are a lot of things going on in Cite Soleil that weren't here when I was here five years ago, and certainly not when I came in 1995. A lot of community networks here are helping people."

Clinton's arrival alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is part of an unprecedented diplomatic outreach by the world body to draw attention to Haiti's desperate plight, and to prod Haitian President Rene Preval to move quickly to help put the country on the road to sustainable development.

With next month's crucial donor's conference in Washington and scheduled elections for 12 Senate seats, the International Crisis Group and others have warned that Haiti must obtain billions in international aid and leaders must get a better grip on the country's affairs or risk a relative calm erupting into chaos.

Signs of potential instability were evident Monday.

Clinton and the U.N. chief toured Haiti's run-down capital and met with officials struggling with high food prices and the enduring effects of four devastating 2008 storms. The leaders called for more foreign aid and urged Haiti's weak central government to take charge of its own development.

Clinton's many handlers carefully crafted the visit. He did not make any political statements and was largely isolated from the anticipation of his visit here by some who still regard him as a hero for returning former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power in 1995 after he was ousted in a military coup and forced to spend three years in exile.

An estimated 6,000 marchers showed up at Port-au-Prince's international airport, wearing President Barack Obama T-shirts and waving signs welcoming Clinton and asking him to return Aristide once gain. But they arrived long after Clinton and his delegation had left.

Thousands again appeared outside the National Palace in the evening where Clinton, Ban and others in the delegation were attending a working dinner with Preval.

"Bill Clinton, we want Aristide," the crowd shouted. ``Ban Ki-moon give us Aristide."

Clinton simply waved to the crowd before entering the palace while Ban turned to the outside gathering.

"I am very encouraged by having seen you and your willingness to work for your country, and your willingness to stay," Ban said. ``You are the hope of this country."

The delegation to Haiti was joined by Haitian born Hip Hop star Wyclef Jean, Irish telecom giant Denis O'Brien and Harvard anthropologist Dr. Paul Farmer. They arrived aboard a chartered State Department airplane.

"I just want to see where they are and if we can have some sort of organized response and maximize the help we can get in this difficult time," Clinton said shortly after boarding the Boeing 757 at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. ``These storms could not have come at a worst time."

Those involved in the scheduling of the trip said Clinton specifically requested the visit to Cite Soleil, the teeming seaside slum that has become the symbol of Haiti's deep poverty and its biggest challenge. While the unpaved streets and ramshackle houses remain unchanged, the community once held hostage by warring armed gangs also has become a symbolic of the United Nation's success in rooting out armed gangs and returning a measure of security to the Haitian people.

"The main thing that I'm hoping from this trip ...is that that there is realization that to move Haiti forward we must move past charity and start to engage in investing in the youth tomorrow," Wyclef told The Miami Herald. ``From a feeding programs to a health program to a computer lab, put the money toward these kids."

This message was conveyed to Clinton and Ban when both sat down with college students who are being assisted by the Haitian Education Leadership Program (HELP) scholarship program in Haiti. As the program's founder provided brief descriptions of the students' success -- one was kicked out of the program for a year and now is the medical director of a hospital in Haiti's Artibonite Valley -- Clinton, relaxed without a jacket, listened carefully.

The statistics are daunting: almost half of the country's estimated 9 million people are under 20 years old. Of the school-aged students, 60 percent are enrolled in primary school, but only 20 percent make it to high school while only 5 percent actually graduate.

Clinton, moved by those statistics and impressed by the students achievement, asked them for their wish list. If they could give the international community one message on behalf of helping Haiti, what would it be, he asked. They all gave the same answer. "If we have an education we would be able to fight against poverty," said 22-year-old Chris Medone, who is studying computers.

Clinton challenged the youngsters further, recalling how more than 200 years ago Haitians broke the chains of slavery and the country was the richest in the Antilles. He told the students they had something to contribute, specifically to preserving their degraded country.

On the drive to the school, Clinton surveyed the barren hill sides, the topsoil washed away, the mounds of garbage piled along the streets.

Clinton has been traveling to Haiti since 1975, when a friend of his and wife Hillary -- now Secretary of State -- offered the two a wedding trip to the Caribbean island.

"I feel they were starting to make a leap forward bound more than ever before in all of 35 years I've been going there and these natural disasters and the international economic disasters have come at the worst possible time," Clinton

said.

Because Haiti is starting at a low base -- most Haitians live on less than \$2 a day -- Clinton said ``the actual money it would take to make a huge difference for them is relatively a small number. So I'm hoping we can figure out how to do it."

Clinton told the students he was inspired by their struggles, saying ``you have been empowered by your education.

``The resources of wealth in this country are the mind and the heart."

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.miamiherald.com>