Haiti needs Biden’s laser focus to allow its people to be safe and prosper | Opinion

BY WILHELM LEMKE
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After the Aug. 14 earthquake, Haitian residents in Les Cayes wait to receive humanitarian aid from the Fund for Economic and Social Assistance. RICHARD PIERRIN GETTY IMAGES

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As the adage goes: “One picture is worth a thousand words.”

Horse-mounted U.S. border agents charging impoverished Haitians, seeking the American Dream through hard, honest work, risks opening a collective wound. Pride in our legacy as a country born from a slave rebellion in Europe’s New World, runs deep in Haiti.

The Republic of Haiti has the lowest per capita income in the hemisphere and has suffered its share of natural disasters, including the devastating earthquakes of 2010 and 2021. This reality is intertwined with the willingness of so many of Haiti’s 12 million people to seek a better life where they can find it.

But, as Haitians, we are also acutely aware that corruption and lack of responsible and accountable governance continue to shackle us, undermining economic development and legitimate business enterprises.

Tragically, the assassination of President Jovenel Moise is a detestable crime. What comes next for Haiti is crucial and cannot be government as usual. Nor should we prioritize near-term elections over a framework that has a chance of providing basic rule of law and economic opportunity to the Haitian people — which would end migration in large numbers.

Indeed, we should see Haiti the same way the U.S. government sees the Northern Triangle. On July 29, the Biden administration released its “Strategy to Address the Root Causes of Migration in Central America.” The strategy really comes down to two pillars: 1. economic opportunity and 2. rule of law.

This is precisely what is needed to enable Haiti’s potential for economic and job growth in the apparel, agro-industry and infrastructure sectors. We hope recent events might encourage a modification to the strategy led by Vice President Kamala Harris.

The United States can take three steps now to help economic prospects, reinforce the legitimate private sector and increase much-needed employment:

First, the apparel industry is Haiti's backbone. It supports close to 60,000 direct jobs and hundreds of thousands of indirect jobs. Haiti’s near $1 billion in apparel exports to the United States represents 90% of total exports.
We need the administration and Congress to reauthorize the HOPE-HELP trade legislation for an additional 10 years or even longer — and to not delay doing so. Reauthorization will allow Haiti to attract further apparel investments for “near-shoring” production.

The HOPE-HELP program is due to expire in 2025, which is simply not long enough for new investors to be assured of the necessary time to get the return on investment.

Second, we urgently need the highest level U.S. and international support, working with Dominican authorities, to shut down the huge contraband trade coming unchecked over the Dominican border into Haiti.

Criminal individuals and organizations are crossing the border passing unchecked and untaxed. No Haitian Customs agent dares stop these trucks to collect the duties owed. They risk their lives of they do so.

Contraband and fraud feed political corruption, depriving the Haitian treasury of hundreds of millions of dollars annually in desperately needed revenue to meet Haitians’ basic needs. As Haiti accelerates toward a failed state, corruption is making an outsized contribution to the collapse.

Third, Haiti needs to reset its political process. Basic government capacity can only be established with accountability and the rule of law. Haiti is at another political crossroad, and getting the election process right requires intensive and well-focused international support.

Again, even though the Biden administration’s “root causes” strategy to address Central American migration does not mention Haiti, its central premise applies, and Haiti could well be included in the following quote:

“Effecting systemic change and achieving the desired end state of a democratic, prosperous and safe region will require the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to govern in a transparent, professional and inclusive manner that favors the public interest over narrow private interests.”

In Haiti, those “narrow private interests” are crippling its development and as Harris wrote in her introduction to the strategy: “Our administration knows that, where corruption goes unchecked, people suffer.”
If the administration includes Haiti in an accelerated implementation of its “root causes” strategy, this could be the best approach to assure that new pictures of a dignified partnership and friendship eventually will replace the images coming from the Texas border today and sustainably mitigate chronic migration tragedies.

*Wilhelm Lemke is the President of the Association des Industries d’Haiti (ADIH), the Haitian Manufacturers Association.*