

Ethel Kennedy leads U.S. congressional delegation on fact finding mission to Haiti

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Leading a U.S. congressional delegation, Ethel Kennedy arrived in Haiti Thursday to investigate how the withholding of foreign aid has deepened despair in the impoverished nation.

The widow of Robert Kennedy and Rep. Donna Christensen, a Democrat from the U.S. Virgin Islands; Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, a Democrat from Illinois; Rep. Diane Watson, a Democrat from California; and Todd Howland, director of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights will spend two days meeting with politicians, religious leaders and banking officials.

On Friday, they plan to meet with President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The group will also visit an AIDS clinic run by Harvard medical-school professor Paul Farmer in Cange, on Haiti's Central Plateau district.

Farmer directs Partners in Health, a non-governmental health care organization. Loune Viaud, the strategic director of his AIDS clinic, won the Robert F. Kennedy 2002 Human Rights Award.

Kennedy said she came to honor the work of the clinic and Viaud, and to visit Aristide, who she called "an old friend." She also said she would seek out more U.S. government "engagement" to help Haitians.

The group will "investigate the impact of the embargo on the poor," said Haiti's foreign press liaison officer Michelle Karshan.

Farmer and Viaud have been outspoken in their criticism of the suspension of foreign aid that followed controversial May 2000 legislative elections, which the opposition denounced as rigged.

In September, the Organization of American States, citing deepening poverty, urged international financial institutions to normalize their relations with Haiti, but no funds have been released.

Some US\$149 million in Inter-American Development Bank loans for health, water, education, and rural road rehabilitation already ratified by Haiti's Parliament will not be released until Haiti clears some US\$20 million in interest arrears, IDB officials say.

The United States has never suspended its \$50 million aid package to Haiti, but it is disbursed only to non-governmental organizations.