

On March 17, 2009, the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA) in San Francisco awarded the 2009 Judith Lee Stronach Human Rights Award to CJA partner Bureau des Avocats Internationaux BAI, a Haitian legal organization based in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Remarks of Mario JOSEPH

I would like to thank the Center for Justice & Accountability for this award, on behalf of all the staff of the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux and the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti. I would like to accept the award in the name of the victims in Haiti, especially the victims of the Raboto massacre, whose courage and persistence make our work possible.

I would like to thank CJA even more for seven years of collaborating to bring our fight for justice to the United States.

We have a proverb in Haiti, “men anpil, chay pa lou.” It means “many hands make the burden light.” Can you say it with me? “Men anpil, chay pa lou”. Again...

In Haiti we carry many burdens. The burden of injustice, the burden of poverty, the burden of political instability. Often these burdens seem impossible to carry. But sometimes we find that if we have enough hands, we can carry them.

When we started the Raboto case, poor people had never used Haiti’s courts to achieve justice against rich or powerful people. But we put our hands together with the Raboto victims, with human rights activists and with judges, prosecutors and police who believed in a democratic justice system for Haiti.

We carried the Raboto case as far as it could go in Haiti. We had a trial, convicted those responsible, and won a damage verdict for our clients. It was a historic victory. But the top leaders of the dictatorship, and their money, were no longer in our country, they were in yours.

Haiti’s criminals and the U.S. government made the injustice of Raboteau international. With CJA, we made the fight for justice international. CJA was a true collaborator, involving BAI and our clients in all the decisions. CJA took every step necessary to ensure that the Raboto victims got their day in American courts. Last May, I carried a nice burden, \$430,000, to our clients in Raboteau.

Many of Haiti’s burdens are at least in part failures of the rule of law. When hurricanes come, the rain floods our cities quickly, because our laws against cutting trees on mountains above the cities are not enforced. Schools collapse on students because no one is held responsible for poor construction. Political violence breaks out when our constitution is ignored.

Our collaborative, legal approach can carry other burdens in Haiti. We have put our hands together with Dr. Paul and Partners in Health to enforce the civil, political and health human rights of prisoners. We work with parents to enforce the human right to attend primary school, a right currently denied to half of our children. We work with political prisoners and their families to free the political prisoners remaining from our most recent dictatorship.

We are grateful for the helping hands of CJA, of Partners in Health, the Haiti Action Committee, Hastings Law School and from all our supporters in the U.S. But Haitians need even more help from people in the U.S., because many of our burdens start in your country. Carl Dorelien and Toto Constant found refuge here because your government collaborated in their brutality in Haiti. The U.S. did not even recognize Haiti, the second independent country in the Americas, for almost sixty years. The U.S. has helped many of Haiti's 33 coup d'états, including the most recent one in 2004, when our President was kidnapped and exiled to Africa on a U.S. plane.

So I ask you tonight to lend your hand to our fight for justice. We need you to ask your government to cancel Haiti's unjust debt to the World Bank, and to treat Haitians coming to the U.S. fairly. We need you to make sure that your government reverses its failed policies to Haiti- not just the failed policies of the last 8 years, but the failed policies of the last 200 years.

I know that sometimes Haiti's problems seem impossible to solve. But Haiti is the country where slaves won freedom by defeating Napoleon's army. It is where Dr. Paul's hospitals provide first-class treatment in remote mountain villages. It is where massacre victims from one of the poorest neighborhoods in the Americas won justice against powerful, connected generals, in the courts of two countries. It is where "men anpil, chay pa lou". Please, say it one more time with me " Men anpil, chay pa lou".