

February 26, 1991

WILLIAM LEHMAN, M.C.

Mr. Chairman, I rise in support of H.R. 3844 because I believe the situation in Haiti is extremely dangerous and poses a real threat to those who are forcibly repatriated. I am convinced that if Haiti were located thousands of miles away from our shores, our government would not have thought twice about extending Temporary Protective Status to Haitians. We already provide such protection to the Lebanese and the Liberians, but the Haitians are subjected to a much tougher test before they are permitted refuge.

This bill does not go so far as to provide temporary protective status. It merely prohibits for six months the involuntary repatriation to Haiti of any Haitian refugees in U.S. custody outside the U.S. on or before February 5, 1991. This is a limited measure and one we should not hesitate to pass. What right do we have to tell the government in Hong Kong that they should not send back the Vietnamese boat people, when we ourselves are doing the same thing with regard to the Haitians? That is a classic case of "Do what I say, not what I do."

This is our opportunity to regain the moral high ground. I am somewhat encouraged that progress is being made in the negotiations to return President Aristide to Haiti, but peace will not return overnight to that tragic nation. We must provide some kind of temporary refuge. The personal stories the Guantanamo refugees have been telling the INS interviewers are chilling. There can be no question that a climate of fear and intimidation exists in Haiti. Murder, torture and other forms of violence are directed at anyone who may be an Aristide supporter.

While the primary purpose of the bill is to prevent the return of the Haitians in U.S. custody, I am pleased that it also provides funded refugee slots for 2,000 Haitians. It is important that those refugees who are eventually permitted to come to the U.S. do not become a burden on the local community. It has always been my position that the federal government must assume the financial responsibility for those it admits.

Mr. Speaker, this is our chance to do what is right, to practice what we preach. We cannot ignore these people in need. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the 1930's when Jews fleeing Nazi persecution were refused our help. I ask my colleagues to vote for H.R. 3844 and I commend Chairman Mazzoli for his compassion and leadership on this issue.