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BAUCUS, GRASSLEY, NELSON, MENENDEZ, LEMIEUX INTRODUCE BILL TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR AMERICANS RETURNING FROM HAITI

Senators' Plan Would Raise the Cap on U.S. Repatriation Assistance Funding for 2010

Washington, DC – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Ranking Member Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), joined by Senators Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and George LeMieux (R-Fla.), today introduced the Emergency Aid to American Survivors of the Haiti Earthquake Act to provide repatriation support for U.S. citizens living in Haiti during the devastating earthquake on January 12. The Senators' proposal would raise the \$1 million annual funding limit for the U.S. Repatriation Program, which assists Americans seeking to return from foreign countries following hardship or disaster. This legislation would provide the program with up to \$25 million for 2010 in order to meet its commitment to more than 14,000 Americans who have already returned home and continue providing assistance to thousands more Americans expected to return over the coming months.

"We have a solemn responsibility to protect our citizens, including those living abroad, and this proposal allows us to meet that obligation. Thousands of Americans were living in Haiti at the time of this disaster, and we need to help bring them home safely and provide the care and resources they need to meet their immediate and basic needs," Baucus said. **"This proposal, combined with legislation we passed to facilitate donations to the relief effort, is a critical part of our response to the crisis in Haiti and we urge our colleagues to move without delay."**

"This will help Americans living in Haiti return to the United States, getting them home if they need to be and clearing the way for aid workers," Grassley said. **"Separately, it's important to continue the Qualifying Individual Program for the people who depend on it."**

"Anything we can do, we should do to help people who survived the devastating earthquake in Haiti," said Nelson.

Menendez said, **"Our fellow American citizens living in Haiti at the time of the devastating earthquake have suffered greatly and they could benefit greatly from these temporary loans as a bridge until they are whole again. These Americans, many of whom will return through New Jersey, need a hand with even the basics, like a temporary home, food, and medical care."**

"Many Americans living in Haiti have lost everything. This allows for critically important transition assistance for those Americans in Haiti facing a very difficult challenge," LeMieux said.

The Social Security Act provides up to \$1 million annually for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to reimburse states for providing aid such as cash, travel expenses to come home, immediate medical care, temporary lodging and food assistance through the U.S. Repatriation Program. Recipients are expected to repay the aid they receive except in the case of extreme hardship, and in a typical year, the program provides regular assistance to Americans and their dependents returning home after facing emergency situations abroad.

In the case of a large-scale crisis, as in Haiti, the mass evacuation of U.S. citizens requires additional funding for the program to fulfill its responsibilities to returning Americans. In 2006, Congress raised the \$1 million annual limit to accommodate Americans returning home from the devastation in Lebanon and during the Gulf War, the annual limit was waived entirely.

Today's legislation raises the \$1 million funding cap to \$25 million for fiscal year 2010 to provide assistance for Americans returning from Haiti.

Additionally, the legislation provides \$65 million in additional funding for the Qualifying Individual Program, which provides assistance for low-income seniors to help cover the costs of their Medicare Part B premiums. Without this additional money, funding for the program will fall short for 2010 and states will be unable to help America's low-income seniors.

The total cost of the bill, \$90 million, is fully paid for through the Medicaid Improvement Fund.

At the time of the earthquake, more than 45,000 U.S. citizens were living in Haiti. More than 5,000 have returned to date and the U.S. State Department expects 600 to 2,000 Americans to return daily over the coming months. The state of Florida has already incurred nearly \$1 million in costs and will need to be reimbursed soon. Without this legislation, HHS will be unable to repay the money owed to states or provide any further assistance to Americans returning home.

The full text of the Emergency Aid to American Survivors of the Haiti Earthquake Act is available on the Finance Committee website at: <http://finance.senate.gov/sitepages/leg/leg012310%20Haiti.pdf>.

The Senate also passed legislation last week to help Americans seeking to provide aid to Haiti by extending the ability to deduct charitable contributions to Haiti on 2009 tax returns through March 1, 2010. More information on that legislation is also available on the Finance Committee website at: <http://finance.senate.gov/press/Bpress/2010press/prb012110e.pdf>.

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