

[Burlington Free Press](#)

Haiti's recovery from a massive earthquake in early 2010 has been painstakingly slow, but progress is being made, two members of Vermont's congressional delegation visiting the island nation said in a telephone news conference Tuesday.

"I have real hope for the future," Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said after he and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., toured areas around the devastated capital of Port-au-Prince. "I am far more hopeful after this trip here than I was before I came down."

Welch agreed but said it was hard to see the damage the earthquake had done to a country that was already struggling with extreme poverty. The January 2010 earthquake measured 7.0 on the Richter scale, flattened much of Port-au-Prince and killed more than 222,000 people.

"It was something I was not able to fully appreciate by reading about it," Welch said of the earthquake's impact. "I'm not sure I can fully appreciate it by seeing it. ... The complexity of life here is immense — just the traffic snarls and the challenge of getting from here to there."

Leahy and Welch spent the day visiting a medical center where youths who lost limbs during the earthquake were being fitted with prostheses, observing a "rubble removal site" and meeting with American aid workers and Haitian officials, including Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive.

"There's an immense amount of suffering that you see, but what you also see is enormous amount of hope," Welch said. "People are going about their business. They're cleaning up the rubble, they do set up medical care facilities. They do get their kids to school."

Leahy estimated that about 25 percent of the \$1 billion the United States has dedicated to the recovery effort has been spent and said he was told that American officials were monitoring the release of the remainder of the money in order to make sure the money was not misspent.

"The concern I heard from a lot of the Haitian officials was that 'You — the United States — have lot of things going on around the world. There's Japan, Libya, two wars. Don't forget us as we try to rebuild, as we try to bring people back. It cannot be done overnight.'"

Leahy and Welch said they were encouraged that the presidential election held in the country last weekend appeared to have been conducted properly and that the anticipated winner appears to be someone who will have the confidence of the Haitian people.

According to polling, entertainer Michel Martelly was the frontrunner in the contest. His closest challenger was the nation's 70-year-old former first lady Mirlande Manigat, who is also a law professor. Results of the voting are expected to be made public next week.

"They are going to have to have a government that cares as much about the people as it does about itself," Leahy said. "For decades, that has not been the case in Haiti."

The two were joined for part of their tour by actor Sean Penn, who has spent months on the island helping Haitians recover from the devastation.

"I'm impressed with him," Leahy said. "I have a lot of movie actors, entertainers who want to come in and see me because they've adopted the issue of the day, usually for the day, and I usually say no. He's lived here for month after month after month. ... That's why I'll continue to work with him."