

KU [Kansas University] prof asked to translate Aristide's statement, Resignation letter written in Haitian Creole, by Jennifer Byrd, The Lawrence Journal-World, March 11, 2004

The director of the Kansas University Institute of Haitian Studies was called upon Monday by the U.S. Department of State to translate the controversial resignation letter of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

KU's Bryant Freeman, a specialist in the Haitian Creole language, said Aristide's letter never said, "I am resigning."

The U.S. Embassy in Haiti translated a key passage of the letter as: "Tonight I am resigning in order to avoid a bloodbath."

Aristide, who is now in exile in Africa, has said he was kidnapped and denied resigning his post.

Freeman translated the controversial passage as: "Thus, if this evening it is my resignation which can prevent a bloodbath, I agree to leave ..."

Mary Ellen Gilroy, director of the Office of Caribbean Affairs at the State Department, contacted Freeman to see if he would do a translation of the document.

"I didn't have a dream I would actually have the original thing," Freeman said.

Freeman said he was called by the State Department because he and Gilroy had worked together in Haiti and he is a recognized expert on the Haitian language.

He's working on the fifth edition of his 55,000-word, Creole-English dictionary. Freeman has studied Haitian history, language and culture for more than 45 years.

Freeman said he did not know what the State Department was planning to do with his translation of Aristide's letter, but he said he thought the document would be historically significant.

"I think this is one of the three most important historic documents in the history of Haiti," Freeman said.

Freeman said the other two historic documents include a letter from the French emperor Napoleon in 1791 calling for the slaves in Haiti to put down their arms, and a 1793 letter by French Commissioner Sonthonax freeing the slaves in Haiti.

The fact each of the documents was done in Haitian Creole makes them important, Freeman said.

"If he (Aristide) were addressing the international community, he would use an international language, either French or English," he said.

"Creole is the language of direct, honest discourse between people in Haiti. He was trying to communicate with his people."