Fifty-five Dominican refugees die at sea

Peter Daniels
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Fifty-five refugees from the Dominican Republic died when the small boat on which they set out for Puerto Rico on July 29 lost power and drifted for nearly two weeks at sea. These are the latest victims of the growing misery in the poorest regions of the world.

Countless millions of impoverished people in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere risk their lives, and many thousands die annually, in the search for even a slight improvement in their conditions of life.

Eighty-six people departed from the Dominican village of El Limon, on the northern coast of the island, on a trip to Puerto Rico that can take as little as one day in good weather. By day two they had almost reached their destination, but the tiny boat, only 30 feet long, apparently ran out of fuel. The captain abandoned the vessel, boarding another boat and saying he would come back with help, but never returned.

Food and water ran out by the third day, as the boat drifted between the islands of Hispaniola (consisting of the Dominican Republican and Haiti) and Puerto Rico. The migrants began to die by the fifth day, as the survivors later recounted.

Some jumped overboard, others survived by drinking the breast milk of women on board, with some demanding that even women who were not lactating provide milk. According to one account, the desperate group at one point considered cannibalism. “Some wanted to eat the dead bodies,” said Ramón Ballano, “...but others of us said ‘no,’ and if we’re going to die, we’ll all die together.”

“Most of us panicked and some threw themselves into the water, while others died of hunger and we had to throw their bodies into the sea,” said another survivor, Mirelis Duarte.

After nearly two weeks, the boat drifted ashore at the Dominican town of Nagua, ironically less than 30 miles from where it had set out. Thirty-nine refugees were still alive, but eight of these died soon afterwards.

Thousands of Dominicans try to reach Puerto Rico every year on small boats, but the numbers have increased enormously in recent months, amidst a deepening economic crisis that has driven many to take desperate measures. The passengers on the ill-fated Dominican boat had paid 25,000 pesos each, or about $450—an enormous sum for them.

The government in Santo Domingo reports 16 percent unemployment in a population of about 8.8 million, but the true figure, especially when underemployment is included, is far higher. Inflation increased to 43 percent in 2003, and basic food prices have nearly doubled in the past year. Fuel shortages and electricity blackouts have created conditions of near-chaos in many areas, with hospitals being forced to postpone surgery in some cases. Meanwhile, the wealthy have made use of private generators for their own power.

In the 1990s, the Dominican Republic was briefly referred to as an economic “success story,” as the growth of tourism and low-wage export industries attracted foreign capital. Investors saw the chance for big profits, with a number of US-based companies establishing majority ownership of the country’s electrical industry. These included the notorious Enron Corp., as well as Virginia-based AES Corporation and the Goldman Sachs investment bank, which entered the business through its acquisition of a North Carolina-based company last year.

The brief boom came to an end, however. The economy contracted last year, for the first time since 1990. It is expected to show a decline in output for a second year in a row.

The government devalued the currency, while bank fraud uncovered last year led to several bank collapses and emergency government measures to assist depositors. The ensuing crisis and loss of revenue have left the authorities unable to pay the electrical companies the sums necessary to subsidize electricity for the poor.

US investors now claim they are owed at least $300 million, and have cut power to the country’s distribution grid. The power blackouts, often lasting 20 hours out of every 24, have taken place against the background of feuding between the companies and the government of outgoing President Hipólito Mejia.

The country is close to defaulting on its foreign debt, which has doubled since 2000. The central bank missed a $27 million interest payment on an international bond that was due in July.

A default can be officially avoided if payment is made within a 30-day period, but there are growing expectations that default will take place sooner rather than later. “It’s an extremely acute situation,” a credit analyst for the Dominican Republic at Standard & Poor’s told the *New York Times*. “We think a default is a lot more likely than not at this point.”

The foreign investors, with the International Monetary Fund behind them, are consigning millions to intolerable conditions. The IMF suspended a $600 million aid package last year, then approved an emergency $100 million loan last February to help pay for electricity. It suspended the remaining $50 million of this money in June.

An IMF team arrived in Santo Domingo several weeks ago to discuss its demands with the incoming government, to be headed by former president Leonel Fernández. He is scheduled to take office at the end of August. Fernández was president from 1996 to 2000 and won another term against Mejia in balloting last May.