

Scores of Haitian refugees killed in shark-infested waters

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The deaths of over 75 Haitian refugees, whose boat capsized in shark-infested Caribbean waters as they sought to make their way to the United States, is one more tragic consequence of the stark poverty and protracted political oppression that have been inflicted upon the island nation.

Washington announced Saturday that the US Coast Guard had suspended its search for more than 40 Haitian immigrants who were missing after their 25-foot boat—crowded with some 160 people—capsized the day before. The bodies of 36 others—23 men and 13 women—were recovered, many of them missing limbs and badly mauled by sharks.

The ship floundered off the British colonial territory of the Turks and Caicos, about 100 miles north of Haiti and a frequent first stop for refugees trying to make their way to the US.

A US Coast Guard spokesman told the Associated Press Saturday that Turks and Caicos authorities had asked for a suspension of the search, “apparently because they believed the likelihood of finding more survivors was very slim.”

British investigators are conducting a probe into the catastrophe. According to initial reports, the boat capsized after it had been intercepted by Turks and Caicos police and was being towed towards land. The British colonial authorities collaborate closely with Washington in an attempt to prevent Haitian refugees from reaching the US.

Survivors of the disaster are being held in a detention camp on the Turks and Caicos main island of Providenciales. Authorities rebuffed attempts by members of the local Haitian community to speak with them and offer assistance. They will soon be deported back to the country they fled.

There are unmistakable indications that the flow of

refugees from Haiti is once again rising. Last month, the US Coast Guard captured a total of 704 Haitians seeking to reach the US, nearly equal to the total number interdicted in all of 2006.

The numbers are the highest since 2004, when over 3,000 Haitians fled their island nation in the wake of a bloody US-backed coup by ex-soldiers and death squad leaders that ousted the government of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Last March 28, over 100 Haitian migrants—including 13 children—reached the Florida coast after a harrowing three-week voyage in a rickety sailboat during which one of the refugees died. The survivors of the voyage were rounded up by Border Patrol agents and hauled off to south Florida detention centers to face what US immigration officials refer to as “expedited removal proceedings.”

The treatment of these Haitian migrants stands in stark contrast to the reception granted Cubans who reach the US coast by the same means. Under the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy implemented by the Clinton administration in 1994, any Cuban migrant setting foot on US land is allowed to stay.

Haitians have also been denied temporary protected status, or TPS, which has been granted to refugees from nine countries, including three in Central America and several in Africa. These refugees are given a renewable stay of deportation for 12-to-16 months. The selection of these countries is made on the basis of existing wars, political crises, natural disasters or the inability of governments to handle the repatriation of their citizens.

On all accounts, Haiti confronts among the worst conditions in the world. It is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with an estimated 80 percent of the population living on less than \$150 a year. Remittances sent home by expatriates working in the

US and other countries constitute Haiti's largest source of income, amounting to 30 percent of the gross domestic product and twice the national budget.

Political instability and repression continue, despite the election of President René Préval, a former Aristide ally. UN occupation troops have continued to clash with residents of poor neighborhoods, claiming scores of lives, while in some parts of the country right-wing death squads remain active. Moreover, the impoverished island nation has yet to recover from severe damage inflicted by successive hurricanes.

A bill providing TPS for Haitian migrants was introduced in the US House of Representatives at the beginning of the year. A similar measure initiated in 2005 died in a House subcommittee.

The vast majority of those Haitians intercepted at sea as well as those detained on land are shipped back to Haiti. The few who are able to establish their refugee status by convincing an immigration judge that they have "credible fear of persecution" are shipped to the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba where they are held in a detention center. US immigration authorities are using the US military base for the same reason that the Bush administration selected it to house its infamous prison for so-called enemy combatants—to deny basic democratic rights on the spurious grounds that the base is not US territory.

Last month, the Bush administration and the Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard announced a cynical and macabre scheme in which a "swap" of Haitian as well as Cuban refugees held by Washington at Guantanamo will be made for refugees that Australia is holding—most of them Sri Lankans and Burmese—on the Pacific island of Nauru.

The blatantly illegal deal treats refugees, many of them traumatized, as little more than livestock that can be traded on an international market. The aim of the scheme is obvious. Both governments hope that by transporting these refugees many thousands of miles away from the countries where they had originally sought asylum, they will deny them contact with family, friends and compatriots. This cruel punishment, both countries hope, will serve to discourage others tempted to escape intolerable conditions in their homelands.

With the ongoing debacle in Iraq, it is seldom recalled in the mass media or in establishment circles

that the US administration also bears direct responsibility for the catastrophic conditions in Haiti.

Within less than a year of the US invasion of Iraq, Washington orchestrated a right-wing coup and then sent in special forces troops to kidnap and forcibly evict Aristide from the country, paving the way for an occupation by some 1,500 US marines who were used to prop up a US puppet regime.

As in Iraq, Bush claimed that US intervention was launched for purely altruistic motives, seeking to "bring order and stability to Haiti" and give the country's people "a hopeful future." Within short order, however, faced with pressing military demands in Iraq, the US administration washed its hands of Haiti, redeploying the Marines to the Middle East and handing the dirty work of occupying Haiti over to a UN force led by Brazilian troops.

The episode was only the latest in a century-long use of US military and economic might to suppress the Haitian people and prevent revolutionary social change in the island nation. This included the US occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934 and its support of the three-decade-long dictatorship of the Duvalier dynasty.

Thus, those risking their lives to escape Haiti today on ramshackle boats sailing through shark-infested waters are fleeing conditions for which Washington bears principal responsibility. The cruel and punitive treatment that they receive from US authorities, including the latest proposal to forcibly "transport" them to Australia, represents one more in a long litany of crimes.



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