

Obama administration deporting 30,000 Haitians

David Walsh
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The US Department of Homeland Security and its Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, under the new Obama administration, are proceeding with the deportation of tens of thousands of Haitian immigrants. The continuity of this brutal policy speaks volumes about the new administration.

According to an ICE spokeswoman, Nicole Navas, the agency had 30,299 Haitians on “final order of removal” last week, meaning that an immigration judge ordered them deported from the US. Some 600 Haitians are currently detained and 243 have electronic monitoring.

After the Caribbean nation, the poorest in the Western hemisphere, was battered by four tropical storms and hurricanes last summer, Washington temporarily halted deportations in mid-September. In December ICE resumed the expulsions, claiming that conditions had normalized in Haiti. Its spokeswoman Navas told the media at the time, “We fully expected to resume deportation flights when it was safe. And we made a determination that it was appropriate to resume deportation based on the conditions on the ground.”

The claim is absurd. In a January 26 letter to Obama’s Department of Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano, the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC), appealing for a stay in the “inhumane deportations,” noted: “The storms [in Haiti] killed 800 and have left tens of thousands of people homeless, living in shelters, on roofs and in mud-filled homes. Flooding wiped out livestock and most of the food crops, deepening already desperate hunger among more than 2 million Haitians. The four storms destroyed 15 percent of Haiti’s fragile economy, the equivalent of 8 to 10 Hurricane Katrinas hitting the United States in one month.”

The *Miami Herald* reported recently that the devastation wrought by the storms was “the worst humanitarian disaster to hit Haiti in 100 years.”

According to a fact sheet prepared by Haitian advocates in the US, Haiti’s third largest city, Gonaives, “has been rendered uninhabitable.” Inadequate sanitation and potable water “and standing pools of polluted flood water have left hundreds of thousands at risk of malaria, hepatitis, and cholera. The nation’s food crop has been largely destroyed, as have farm tools, seeds for next year’s crop, and livestock and irrigation systems vital to farmers and rice production. Dozens of children have starved to death.”

A UNICEF Humanitarian Action Report on Haiti, released February 3, noted that the combination of storms affecting 800,000 people, including 300,000 children, and food price riots earlier in the year had plunged Haiti into a massive humanitarian crisis. UNICEF reports that 24 percent of children under age five in Haiti suffer from chronic malnutrition and 9 percent from acute malnutrition.

The 2008 storms totally destroyed some 23,000 houses and damaged another 85,000 in the Caribbean nation. “The few existing basic social services were severely damaged,” writes the UN agency. “Across the country, 964 schools were reported either totally or partially destroyed leaving nearly 217,000 schoolchildren directly affected,” in a context “where nearly 400,000 school-aged children (around 15 percent of the total number of children) had no access to education before. Sixty percent of the damaged schools are government-owned.”

As a result, the survey notes, “critical numbers of children from destitute families” will be denied “their right to education.”

UNICEF explains, “Because of the 2008 storms and hurricanes, the little that many Haitians were living with in the most affected areas was wiped out and turned almost to nothing, leaving children even more exposed to higher risks of exploitation, neglect and abuse in a country where already more than 4 in 10 children (1.62 million) are living in absolute poverty.”

In the wake of the storms, Haitian President Rene Preval officially requested that undocumented Haitians in the US be granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS), permitting them to stay and work temporarily. Then Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, on behalf of the Bush administration, turned down the request in December.

At present the citizens of six countries are designated for TPS. The US granted the status for El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, for example, due to Hurricane Mitch in 1999 and severe earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. The period of TPS for those the Central American nations was extended in September 2008.

The Haitian government is not currently cooperating with US officials to facilitate the expulsion of the tens of thousands of its citizens. Haiti’s authorities are refusing to process travel documents “until further notice,” indicated Ralph LaTortue, the country’s consul general in Miami, home to thousands of the immigrants. The *South Florida Sun Sentinel* explains that the action is “forcing US

immigration authorities to use a diplomatic loophole: pushing Haitians to get their own travel documents, such as passports, so they can be sent home.”

In its January 26 letter, the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center took note of the deportation of Louiness Petit-Frere, 31, three days previously. The FIAC commented: “Here 10 years with no criminal history, he leaves his US-citizen wife behind, along with his mother and four siblings, all of whom have legal status. Mr. Petit-Frere was detained by ICE at the Citizenship and Immigration Services interview while he and his U.S.-citizen wife were in the process of legalizing his status.... One of his brothers, US Marine Sgt. Nikenson Peirrelou, served and was injured in Iraq. Sgt Peirrelou said, ‘I don’t think it’s right to deport him after he was doing the right thing in trying to legalize.’”

The deportation orders threaten many families with real tragedy, as they will have to decide, as the FIAC observes, “whether to subject US citizen spouses and children to Haiti’s disastrous conditions or to leave them behind and be torn apart.”

Immigration advocates assert that a relatively small number of Haitians were deported in December, but that “there has been an uptick since Obama’s inauguration to deport Haitians without a criminal record, many of them married to US citizens or who have American-born children,” according to the *Miami Herald*. Randolph McGrorty of Catholic Legal Services told the newspaper, “We heard about a handful of people who had been deported. Now there’s this flurry of activity.... There are too many signs to deny it.”

During the run-up to the November 2008 election, notes Caribbean World News, Obama’s “then national political director for the general election campaign, Haitian American Patrick Gaspard, aggressively targeted the Haitian voting bloc in South Florida. Now, weeks into the new administration, some 30,000 Haitians face deportation.”

Given the Obama administration’s record on every major issue, there is no reason to believe that it will not kowtow to right-wing, anti-immigrant forces on the Haitian question.

In a February 9 open letter to Obama, the FIAC and dozens of other groups appealed to the president to stop the deportations. To continue them, the letter asserted, would be “contrary to your administration’s values of fairness, transparency and respect for human rights.”

No official reply has yet been received to either the letter to Napolitano or to Obama.

I spoke with Susana Barciela, FIAC policy director, about the deportations. “Our organization has been asking for a stay, following the terrible storms and hurricanes and all the devastation. The conditions in Haiti remain terrible. People are eating mud pies. There is a real danger of famine.

“For three months after September 19 Haitians were not deported. However, Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff denied Haiti TPS, although the president of the country requested it. TPS is something that’s granted countries that have suffered from natural disaster or civil conflicts. Haiti is eligible on many grounds.

“There are compelling reasons not to send the Haitians back, moral and other reasons. When you send people back to a ravaged country, you’re interfering with the ability of the government to recover. These are poor people who need shelter, food, healthcare. You’re making it harder for the country to recover from the disasters. There’s also the matter of the remittances that Haitians in the US send back home; those are vital for the economy there.

“In December, ICE began deporting Haitians again. We have fought on individual cases, and we won one last week, a woman with a sick child—a dramatic case.

“We, along with various other organizations, sent a letter to Obama last week. We asked for a stay in the deportations. We said that they were not in keeping with the values of his administration. We’re hoping that this administration will do the right thing.”

Was there any reason to believe that the Obama administration would adopt a different policy than the Bush government? “I think so,” Barciela said. “We have hope. We are hopeful that there are people in the administration who will reasonably consider the issue.”

In a statement to the WSWS, Marguerite Laurent of the Haitian Lawyers Leadership Network (HLLN) commented: “Why does Obama’s Homeland Security feel it must deport 30,000 Haitians now, to storm ravaged, famine-stricken Haiti?

“When the US deports an income earner to storm-ravaged Haiti, this decreases remittances and further impoverishes family members. Diaspora remittances are the most effective and direct aid to the Haitian poor in Haiti. We do not believe the Obama administration will continue the racist and discriminatory immigration policies of the Bush administration.

“HLLN continues to urge the Obama administration to do the right thing and grant relief to the Haitians in the same manner it has provided appropriate assistance to the Hondurans, Nicaraguans and El Salvadorans.”



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