

At least nine Haitian immigrants drown off Florida coast

Tom Eley
15 May 2009

On Wednesday, a boat carrying Haitian immigrants capsized in the ocean fifteen miles off Boynton Beach, Florida, killing at least nine. The US Coast Guard pulled 16 survivors from the water.

The vessel tipped over around 2 a.m. in the Atlantic Ocean, about 70 miles north of Miami. Ten hours passed before bodies were spotted by another boater, who rescued three and called the Coast Guard. Among the survivors were men, women, and children.

The number of those who died, but whose bodies vanished, is not yet clear. “We don’t know how many people we’re looking for,” Coast Guard Captain James Fitton said in a news conference, adding, “The boat was obviously overloaded.” Only eight of those recovered had life vests.

Three Coast Guards boats, two helicopters, and a small plane participated in the rescue, and both a hospital and a morgue were quickly erected in nearby Riviera Beach.

In recent years, large numbers of Haitians have drowned attempting to make their way to Florida. In May 2007, at least 61 Haitians perished when their boat capsized near the Turks and Caicos Islands. Survivors say the boat, loaded with 160 people, was rammed by a local government patrol boat. In April, 2008, at least 14 died in a disaster similar to Wednesday’s. It is certain that far more die than is known, their boats and bodies lost at sea.

Wednesday’s survivors face imprisonment and possible deportation, in line with Washington’s longstanding policy.

The immigrants were in the process of entering the US via the Bahamas when the ship capsized. The size of the Haitian and Caribbean immigration tends to increase in May due to the month’s relatively tranquil

waters. Hurricane season resumes in June.

A local healthcare worker, quoted in the New York Times, expressed sympathy for the immigrants. “It makes you wonder what people go through to get here,” Betty Moore, 49, said. “For people to go through such extremes, there must be something horrible going on in their home country.”

The immigrants flee desperate poverty and hunger in Haiti—conditions created and perpetuated by US capitalism, and worsened by both a spate of destructive storms that took place in 2008 and unrelenting food shortages accentuated by the economic crisis. Even in normal times, 80 percent of Haiti’s population lives on 2 dollars a day or less.

Susana Barciela, policy director for the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC), spoke with the World Socialist Web Site. She said that, in terms of economic destruction, last year’s storms would be the equivalent of 15 Hurricane Katrinas hitting the US within one month. “There are a lot of desperate Haitians on the island,” she said. “Now, because of the storms, the country has lost 15 percent of its GDP, and as bad as thing were before, they’re much worse now.”

The immigrants are forced to make perilous sea crossings to Florida due to the virtual prohibition by the US government of their legal entry, enforced by the Coast Guard’s militarization of the Caribbean.

They spend their life savings—according to some accounts the tickets cost from \$3,000 to \$4,000—for passage on boats navigated by smugglers in a trade known as “human trafficking.” Some are murdered at sea by smugglers who, having already received payment, have little incentive to risk a confrontation with the Coast Guard.

The tragic situation facing Haitian immigrants is an expression of a global phenomenon. Similar tragedies,

resulting in the deaths of large numbers of desperate economic refugees, occur regularly in the deserts of the US Southwest (Mexican and Central American immigrants), near European shores or enclaves (African immigrants) and in the waters off Australia (Asian immigrants).

President Barack Obama has not adopted a more humane policy than his predecessor, George W. Bush. The Coast Guard says it has arrested 1,377 immigrants in the fiscal year starting in October, an increase of over 400 from the previous year. And Washington continues to conjoin the militarization of the Caribbean, which forces the dangerous crossings, to a policy of mass deportation for those who reach Florida's shores.

In March, the Department of Homeland Security maintained a Bush administration deportation order potentially affecting more than 30,000 Haitians immigrants. The deportations had been suspended in September, after four hurricanes and tropical storms left Haiti facing what the Miami Herald called its "worst humanitarian disaster ... in 100 years."

Immigrant rights groups have mounted pressure on the Obama administration, requesting it to grant the Haitians an extended temporary stay in the US that might include work permits. This could be achieved through Haitian immigrants' designation under Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which currently extends certain residency privileges to nationals from a handful of countries that face unsafe return due to armed conflict or natural disasters.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has not clarified her position on the request. The deportation order currently remains in effect.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact