

Dozens of Haitian immigrants drown off Turks and Caicos

David Walsh
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In the largest tragedy involving Haitian refugees at sea in several years, dozens of people remain missing after a boat on which they were traveling broke up on a reef near the Caribbean islands of Turks and Caicos.

By Wednesday afternoon, nearly 120 people had been rescued, but authorities reported finding 16 bodies and some 70 immigrants, who had not been accounted for, were presumed drowned.

US Coast Guard spokesperson Jennifer Johnson told the media, “We hope that there are survivors and we can get them medical attention.... However, as time goes by, it becomes less and less likely because of exposure and fatigue.”

There is some confusion as to when the boat went down. Johnson indicated the accident occurred Monday afternoon, but Turks and Caicos Deputy Police Commissioner Hubert Hughes told reporters it could have happened Sunday night. The accident was not reported to the Coast Guard, which patrols the area some 600 miles southeast of Miami, until Monday.

Survivors reported that the boat, bound for either the Bahamas or the US, left Haiti late last week with 160 people on board; it later picked up an additional 40 at an unknown location. The vessels carrying Haitian immigrants, each equipped with only a sail and a rudder, and no other navigational equipment, are typically 40 to 60 feet long.

Johnson of the Coast Guard described the boats as “grossly overloaded.... Two hundred people on a sailboat is astronomical.” She said there were reports of “20-knot winds and six-foot seas out there.”

Shipwrecks of such vessels often occur in the waters around Turks and Caicos, a British Overseas Territory and tourist spot with a population of 33,000 people. The area is apparently especially treacherous for

boaters because of the many coral reefs lying just beneath the surface.

A survivor of the wreck, Alces Julien, told the Associated Press (AP) at a hospital where those rescued were being treated for dehydration, “We saw police boats and we tried to hide until they passed.... We hit a reef and the boat broke up.”

A Haitian embassy official, Donald Metelus, who had spoken with survivors, told the media that after the collision with the reef, “sea water spilled into an area below deck where female passengers were crowded tightly together. ‘The bottom opened wide open when it hit the reef,’ Metelus said.” (AP)

The government of Turks and Caicos lost no time deporting the economic refugees back to Haiti; 60 were flown home Tuesday. The rest spent the night in a gym, on cots at another detention site, or in hospital.

The US Coast Guard has returned more than 1,600 undocumented immigrants to Haiti since October 2008, a 20 percent increase over the same period the year before. American authorities seized 124 Haitians aboard another overcrowded boat last week and brought them to Cap Haitien on Monday.

Survivors of a disaster in May 2007, in which nearly 100 Haitians lost their lives, some devoured by sharks, alleged that a Turks and Caicos patrol boat rammed their vessel as it neared shore and towed the boat out to deeper waters.

In mid-May 2009, at least nine Haitians drowned off the coast of southern Florida, while 16 were rescued. Eleven months earlier, in April 2008, 22 Haitian immigrants died at sea northwest of Nassau, Bahamas.

An overcrowded ferry, navigating between the towns of Belle-Anse and Marigot on Haiti’s southeast coast, capsized July 11. Nine bodies were found in the water, and dozens of people were not accounted for.

Those who set out for the US or some other Caribbean island in these small boats are attempting to escape unspeakable social conditions in Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world.

More than 80 percent of the Haitian population attempts to survive on less than \$2 a day, and over 70 percent of the adult workforce is unemployed. The nation has the highest rate of infant mortality (129 of every 1,000 children die before their fifth birthday) and HIV/AIDS (6.1 percent of the adult population is infected) in the region. Between 13 and 20 percent of Haitian children are malnourished.

Dr. Patricia Wolff of Meds & Food for Kids, a nonprofit organization, told CNN in 2008 that “Haitians are so desperate for food that many mothers wait to name their newborns because so many infants die of malnourishment.” Other Haitian mothers have to “make an excruciating choice” and “choose among their children,” says Wolff. “They try to keep them alive by feeding them, but sometimes they make the decision that this one has to go.”

The devastation wreaked by four hurricanes or severe storms in 2008 added to the misery, wiping out 15 percent of Haiti’s GDP and causing \$1 billion in damage. The *Miami Herald* called it “the worst humanitarian disaster to hit Haiti in 100 years.” Moreover, the *Herald* noted in June that “Haiti still had not received a penny of the \$300 million in hurricane aid promised to the storm-ravaged island by the international community at a donors conference in April.”

Some 28,000 Haitians in the US remain under the threat of deportation, pending action by the Department of Homeland Security.

Pro-Haitian and immigrant rights organizations in the US are pressing for the undocumented Haitians to be granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). This is given to immigrants who are temporarily unable to return safely to their home countries because of war, natural disaster or other extreme circumstances.

The Obama administration inherited the brutal deportation policy from the government of George W. Bush, and, despite pressure from advocacy groups and local politicians, “it has yet to budge” on the TPS issue, “even though it’s so far halted deportation for those affected. For now, the Haitian nationals in desperate need of some form of immigration relief remain in

limbo.” (Caribbean World News, July 22, 2009)



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