US to resume deportations to Haiti

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Less than a year after the Haiti earthquake killed hundreds of thousands of people, the US government is quietly preparing to resume deportations to the cholera-gripped country.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authorities announced December 10 that the agency is preparing to resume deportations, on a mass scale. Last week, ICE officials said the agency had rounded up more than 350 Haitians to be deported in January.

Thus far, the government has said it is limiting deportations to people with criminal convictions—which can range from felony offenses to the most minor violations—and estimates that at least 700 Haitians will be deported over the next year.

"People are terrified," Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, told the Associated Press. "We've got folks who are eligible for temporary protected status who are afraid to come forward and apply now because they think they're going to be detained and deported."

The quake killed as many as 300,000, or 2 percent of the population, and exposed the country's ruling elite as criminal, beholden to US imperialism, and utterly incapable of mounting a humanitarian response. Nearly a year on, at least 1 million people—one in every ten Haitian citizens—remain homeless as a result of the disaster.

Haiti is torn by a cholera epidemic that has killed nearly 3,000 since October. Its resources—all but destroyed in the sixth-deadliest earthquake in human history—are strained to the limit. Nationwide, hospitals have logged more than 121,000 cases.

Some 650,000 people, or 6 percent of the country's population, are expected to contract cholera in 2011, the World Health Organization said this month.

The waterborne disease, almost certainly brought to Haiti by UN peacekeepers from Nepal, is highly contagious in regions where clean water and proper sewage systems are not available. The lack of meaningful aid by the national government and international forces has stoked anger and desperation among the population and sparked repeated protests and clashes with UN soldiers.

"People deported from the US to Haiti end up in Haitian jails and prisons which are now gripped in a raging cholera epidemic," wrote the Center for Constitutional Rights in an open letter to US President Barack Obama. "Sending people to Haiti under these circumstances will end up being a death sentence for many," it continued.

The letter was sent together with an affidavit signed by two lawyers who visited a prison where 6 percent of the prisoners had contracted cholera. They wrote that "Prison officials advised us that there is no clean water for the prisoners" and that all drinking water "came from the Artibonite river, the source of the cholera," without being adequately purified. The lawyers noted that there were "no toilets" in the prison.

"In terms of every human rights standard, this is unconscionable," said Laura Raymond, education and outreach associate for the Center for Constitutional Rights International Human Rights docket, in a telephone interview.

Ms. Raymond visited the country in October, and said conditions there were "at the breaking point." "I can't even wrap my head around deporting people there," she said. "Even if they weren't going into the prison system, a million and a half people are living in tents. A lot of the people in the camps I visited were living under nothing but tarps."

"Many Haitians living in the US are afraid of being deported. When you don't have family, you don't have a social structure to come back to, your life is in danger."

"In October, none of the money that the US had assigned for reconstruction had been released. People

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saw US assistance money going to influence the election, but not to provide the basic necessities of life," she said.

The US funded the entire $14 million cost of the November 28 election, the outcome of which has still not been announced. On December 20, Haitian officials said the results would not be released until the Organization of American States reviewed the vote.

Initial results of the vote, characterized by mass disenfranchisement and fraud, called the results in favor of two right-wing candidates and prompted demonstrations and riots throughout the capital of Port-au-Prince.

In the wake of the earthquake, the Obama administration suspended deportations and granted temporary protected status to Haitians already in the country. The status, granted to those fleeing civil or environmental disasters, allows immigrants to live and work in the United States.

More than 61,000 people have applied for the program, half of them living in Florida. Immigration officials anticipate that tens of thousands more will apply before the January 18 deadline.

However, this arrangement is set to expire in July 2011, and many Haitians are justifiably worried that the US will seek to deport them afterwards.

While the US has given this modicum of protection to Haitian immigrants who were already in the country before the earthquake, it has strenuously sought to block refugees fleeing the disaster from entering the United States.

The US Coast Guard returned 1,158 refugees who were caught at sea in the 12 months leading up to September 2010, according to the Associated Press.

The deportation of Haitians with criminal records sets the stage for the genocidal deportation of the tens of thousands of undocumented Haitians immigrants into unimaginable conditions. It will inevitably mean the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

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