

US begins deportation of Haitians

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The US deported 27 Haitian nationals last Thursday, resuming forced repatriations to the devastated country a year after the massive earthquake struck of January 2010. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) plans to send 700 immigrants back to Haiti this year, ignoring the objections of human rights groups, which insist that the move is equivalent to a death sentence.

ICE spokeswoman Barbara Gonzalez has justified the deportations by arguing that all those sent back are “criminal aliens,” having been convicted in US courts of various violations of the law. All have already served sentences in American prisons.

One of those on Thursday’s flight was Lyglenson Lemorin, an individual persecuted by the US state for several years. Under the Bush administration, Lemorin was arrested as part of an anti-terrorism sting operation against what came to be known as the Liberty City Seven. The government used entrapment to fabricate a case against a group of Haitian immigrants for supposedly planning to blow up the Sears Tower in Chicago. “Poorly educated and practically destitute, the defendants didn’t seem to have the means to engage in jihad, or to train with weapons or explosives, court records show,” notes the *Wall Street Journal*. It took three trials for the government to get any convictions, with even the prosecutors acknowledging that the supposed plot was more “aspirational than operational.”

For his part, Lemorin was acquitted in the second trial, a development considered a significant blow to the Bush administration’s efforts. He had moved to Atlanta with his wife and children well before the other members of the alleged terrorist group were even arrested. His acquittal, however, did not prevent the government from continuing to incarcerate Lemorin, a legal US resident, on the grounds that he remained “a threat to national security” and should be deported.

Thus, since 2007, Lemorin has languished in US jails, only now to be sent back to Haiti, a country from which he emigrated as a young child.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, Alternative Chance, and the Florida Immigration Advocacy Center tried in early January to block the forced repatriations by filing an emergency petition with the Inter-American Commission on Civil Rights. No action was taken, however. That petition argued that the deportations constituted a form of “cruel and unusual punishment,” and the likelihood, given the conditions that prevail in Haiti, that deportees would be deprived of the “right to life, family and due process.”

Haiti is awash in political conflict and social misery. Currently, outgoing president Rene Preval is being pressured by the Organization of American States (OAS) to accept a revision to last November’s election results that would knock Preval’s chosen successor out of the race in an upcoming second-round runoff. Widespread fraud and ballot stuffing have provoked mass outrage, including violent anti-government protests.

Election violence is expected to be ongoing, and could be exacerbated by other recent developments in the midst of this contested situation. On January 18, former Haitian dictator Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier was arrested and charged with corruption, a spate of financial crimes and murder, shortly after returning to the country. The return of Duvalier, who continues to command the sympathy of sections of Haiti’s ruling elite despite his brutal legacy, has created a new base for further political conflict. Jean-Claude Aristide, the populist elected leader twice overthrown in US-backed coups, has also now indicated a desire to return to Haiti.

The US deportees to Haiti, many of whom no longer have family members inside the country or other support networks, are also returning to horrific living

conditions. Nearly one million people are still residing in tent camps, where squalor has led to an outbreak of cholera that has already taken nearly 4,000 lives. Public health officials estimate that the total number of infections, which are spreading in over-crowded facilities that lack proper sanitation and clean water, could hit 400,000. Women's organizations operating in the camps report an epidemic of rapes, as well as increasing instances of child prostitution, as joblessness and homelessness fuel social desperation.

Large portions of the country's housing stock and infrastructure remain in ruins, with whole areas of the capital city, Port-au-Prince, still clogged with debris. Only 10 to 20 percent of the \$9 billion that international donors pledged to finance Haiti's earthquake recovery has been released. In many cases lenders cite the instability of the region as a reason to withhold aid.

The decision to force to Haitians to return to this hellhole shows the real attitude of US imperialism to the destitute nation at its doorstep. Immediately following the January 2010 earthquake, the US flooded Haiti with military personnel not, as was stated at the time, to provide humanitarian relief, but in an effort to guard against a politically destabilizing, popular uprising in this geo-strategically important country. The US presence, which served to block the effective distribution of relief supplies, was folded up even as tens of thousands of bodies remained trapped under rubble and many more were still in need of medical attention. Since then, former US President Bill Clinton has overseen the main relief agency established in the country, with his primary goal being to establish Haiti as a functioning, cheap-labor platform in the Western hemisphere.

The Obama administration moved forward with the deportations after lifting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians, a special immigration status that can be granted to halt repatriations when dangerous conditions prevail in the home country. Up until January 2010, Haitians, who hail from the most impoverished country in the Western hemisphere, scarred by decades of violence, had never been granted TPS. It has been the routine policy of successive Democratic and Republican administrations to block Haitians from entering the country, regularly using the Coast Guard to drive back overcrowded boats of

desperate refugees fleeing violence and misery perpetrated by the US-backed Haitian ruling elite.

As of 2010, there were 30,000 Haitians in the United States slated for deportation. The Department of Homeland Security claims it presently plans to send back only those with criminal records. However, the Haitian-American community is doubtful, with Marlie Hall of the online newspaper *Thegrio.com* noting that "people have little faith" in the government's promises.

A New York-based non-profit that provides social services to the community, Haitian-Americans United for Progress (HAUP), told *Thegrio.com* that they are seeing widespread fear of deportations. "I have no idea what's going to come out next week, what's going to come out next month," said HAUP Director Elsie Saint Louis Accilien.

Legal aid societies in Florida and New York, where many Haitian immigrants live, are now trying to help those facing deportation this year. Many are being transferred to a federal detention center in Louisiana, the last stop before being flown out of the country. However, they say, there is little they can do, and most of their efforts are directed towards helping people establish contact with relatives in Haiti in the remote hope that they might have someone to rely on upon return.



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