

# Haitian immigrants face desperate conditions

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In the early morning hours of August 25, 20 Haitian immigrants, including five children, tried to come ashore on a beach near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Nineteen survived the swim from the boat, which dropped them in water just off the beach, but one woman drowned.

The US government accused smugglers of transporting the Haitians, and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency took the survivors to the Broward Transitional Center, from which they will be sent back to Haiti. Instead of showing any sympathy for the dead woman and the others who risked their lives, US Border Patrol spokesman Frank Miller told the press, “Our priority is to prosecute these smugglers.”

Two days after the landing, ICE still hadn’t released the names of those taken into custody or of the woman who died. Anxiety resulting from the unknown fate of her daughter caused one woman, already living in the US, to have a heart attack. The press dropped any coverage of the incident only two days later.

The workers being treated so callously are fleeing one of the poorest countries in the world. A June 2014 IMF “Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper” found that more than 70 percent of Haitians subsist on less than \$2 per day, and that in 2010-2011 half of Haitians were earning only 50 cents per day. An estimated 35.6 percent of the population face “deficiencies” in drinking water availability, 56.2 percent do not use modern fuels and 52.2 percent suffer deficient sanitation systems.

Remittances from the Haitian diaspora in 2012 totaled \$1.6 billion, or 21 percent of Haiti’s gross domestic product. Two-thirds, about \$1.1 billion, came from Haitian emigrés living in the United States.

The government of President Michel Martelly and Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe is building up a 16,000-strong police force to suppress unrest, while catering to wealthy tourists and cruise companies. In

July Lamothe visited Miami to work out a Memorandum of Understanding with Royal Caribbean Cruise, Ltd., to expand the port at Labadie and open one on the island of La Tortue.

These Royal Caribbean resorts, which will also shuttle tourists to historic landmarks like the Citadel and the Sans-Souci Palace, will bring practically no benefit to the millions of Haitians living in dire poverty. Nonetheless, Lamothe said with utter cynicism, “I believe that, as far as the future tourists are concerned, it is worth it to know that the money that you are spending while having fun is helping someone to get out of poverty... and that is what I call a tourism of solidarity.”

The desperation of Haitians trying to reach the United States is also driven by a crisis in the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti. In September 2013 the Dominican Constitutional Tribunal handed down its decision TC/0168/13, which stipulated that Haitians born in the Dominican Republic to parents who had arrived there illegally after 1929 have no Dominican citizenship. The ruling deprived more than 300,000 people of a citizenship they’d been told they had, because their births were now classified as occurring “in transit.”

The 2013 ruling made retroactive a 2004 ruling that had changed the definition of “in transit” from being in the country for fewer than 10 days to being in the country illegally. The Constitutional Tribunal claimed that under the November 22, 1969 International Convention on Human Rights, “every person has the right to a nationality, which could be the nationality of the State in whose territory he was born, ‘if he doesn’t have the right to another’,” and that “the State is not obligated to grant its nationality to those born in its territory.”

An article published by the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State

University tells the story of several workers made stateless by these decisions. Miledis Juan, for example, was born in the Dominican Republic in 1985 and has never lived in Haiti. She was granted both a Dominican birth certificate and a *cédula* (national ID card), which have now been taken from her *ex post facto*. Of her one-year-old son Juan, she says, “My biggest fear is that he’s in the country without documents. He is nobody in the country.”

The article states bluntly that birth certificates “are required to get married, obtain a high school diploma, start a business, get a driver’s license or passport or even sign up for a phone plan.” It quotes Liliana Gamboa of the Open Society Justice Initiative: “I think people without an identity, without a nationality, are really the ones who are most unprotected in the world.”

After international outcry, the Dominican government made noises about a “regularization” program that would give identity papers to affected workers. After negotiations with the Haitian government, it was decided that the latter would provide a birth certificate, a national ID card and a passport to those who had lost Dominican citizenship because of TC/0168/13.

The resulting Program of Identification and Documentation for Haitian Immigrants (French initials PIDIH) boasted on August 26 of this year that it had taken applications from 8,600 people in its first month. However, the program has a deadline of May 31, 2015, and the government has shown no sympathy for the desperate workers it claims to be helping. In a July incident, some 3,000 applicants, many of whom had been waiting since 3 a.m., gathered outside a Santo Domingo office only to be chased away by the police.

The Dominican government has offered a “regularization” program for Haitians who immigrated illegally before October 2011. However, the requirements are designed to make a successful application impossible. The English edition of *Haiti Libre*, for example, reported that the list of required documents includes “bank book, a notarized certificate of domicile, invoices showing that the applicant has made significant purchases in Dominican territory in a store that has a Tax Identification Number... a certificate of residence [in the absence of proof of payment of rent] issued by a neighborhood Committee signed by 7 witnesses, who often demand money for this service.”

As of July 30, 2014 the program had been operating

for two months, and 33,700 applicants had opened their cases. Of them, only 260 were able to submit complete applications, and 17 had been approved for “regularization.”



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