

Washington's criminal deportations to Haiti threaten to ignite pandemic

Alberto Escalera**26 May 2020**

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is planning to carry out a fourth deportation flight shipping Haitian refugees and migrants back to Port-au-Prince today under conditions in which the impoverished Caribbean country is confronting a threatened explosion of the coronavirus pandemic. Its health care system in shambles and confronting a protracted political crisis, Haiti is among the least prepared countries in the hemisphere to deal with the deadly pandemic.

The flight, which will carry 78 Haitians deemed in violation of US immigration laws, follows widespread protests after ICE attempted to deport to Haiti five detainees who were known to have tested positive for the coronavirus at the privately run Pine Prairie, Louisiana immigration detention center. Detainees there went on hunger strike because of the virus running rampant in the for-profit lock-up facility and the lack of any protections.

According to official figures, Haiti has roughly 1,000 confirmed cases and has recorded nearly 30 deaths. Both figures are unquestionably severe underestimations of the real impact of COVID-19 under conditions in which there has been scant testing and many Haitians lack access to health care. Nonetheless, the numbers are rising steeply.

In addition to the innocent migrant workers being forcibly sent back with possible coronavirus infections to the impoverished country they fled, Tuesday's flight will reportedly carry another deadly threat to the population of Haiti.

According to press reports, the May 26 flight's passenger list includes one Emmanuel "Toto" Constant, a death squad leader and long-time CIA "asset." In the years following the 1991 military coup that overthrew elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Constant headed the infamous Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti (FRAPH), a paramilitary organization, whose death squads were responsible for more than 3,000 assassinations along with torture and rapes.

In 2001, Constant and several officers of the military and police high command under the coup government were tried and convicted *in absentia* by a Haitian court for their role in the 1994 Raboteau massacre, in which his FRAPH paramilitaries and army troops terrorized an entire slum neighborhood in the northern city of Gonaïves. The sentences of all those convicted

for the atrocity would later be overturned by Haiti's Supreme Court on a technicality in 2005.

Constant has been living in the United States since fleeing Haiti in 1994 after the then exiled Aristide was reinstalled after coming to terms with the US State Department and the IMF to carry out the policies dictated by US imperialism.

Constant was recently released from a New York state prison and placed in US immigration custody after serving 12 years of a 37-year sentence for crimes carried out in the US, including mortgage fraud and grand larceny. It is widely believed that if repatriated to Haiti, the former FRAPH leader will not face any legal consequences for his past crimes under the widely despised regime headed by President Jovenel Moïse, which itself is mobilizing armed thugs to terrorize Haitian working people.

The repatriation of Constant and his likely return to his deadly profession would add an additional layer of cruelty to the already callous immigration and deportation policies being carried out by US imperialism in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic.

There are approximately 32,000 people currently being held under concentration camp-like conditions in ICE detention prisons—many of them run by private, profit-making companies—throughout the United States. These facilities have fast become foci of COVID-19 infections as detainees are forced to live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, often in cages, without adequate medical attention.

In March, the Trump administration closed the US-Mexico border to all asylum seekers under the pretext of preventing the spread of coronavirus within the US. The US State Department subsequently shut down various consulates located in countries from which many asylum seekers come to the US. US immigration courts have also ceased to operate, and in April, Trump signed an executive order suspending the issuance of green cards to immigrants abroad.

At the same time, the Trump administration has continued to carry out deportation flights to Central American and Caribbean countries like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. A recent analysis by the Center for Economic and Policy Research found that in the six weeks between March 15 and the end of April of this

year, ICE carried out at least 55 deportation flights to these Central American and Caribbean countries.

US deportation policies are contributing to a significant spike in coronavirus infections in Central American and Caribbean countries already suffering from fragile health care systems crippled by years of austerity and war as well as extremely limited testing capacity. In several cases, ICE deportation flights are being carried out despite the closure of local airports and protests by government officials, typically subservient to Washington, who are fearful of the social and political repercussions of the spread of infections from newly arrived deportees from the US.

In Haiti, a country with 11 million people, there are a total of 126 intensive care unit beds and 68 ventilators. The country has one of the lowest ratios of physicians per 100,000 inhabitants in the world, .234 as of 2018, and a recent UN report concluded that there were currently only 911 doctors remaining in the country. Haiti has only two laboratories with the capacity to process the scant number of coronavirus tests that are being administered.

An additional factor accelerating the humanitarian crisis facing Haiti as the virus spreads is the return of tens of thousands of migrant workers from the neighboring Dominican Republic. An estimated 500,000 Haitians work there under conditions of brutal exploitation and extreme social and political alienation.

The Dominican Republic, which is highly reliant upon tourism, has one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 infections in the region. As of May 23, there were 14,000 confirmed cases and nearly 500 deaths in the country, again a fraction of the real numbers given inadequate testing and health care.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) government headed by Danilo Medina has enacted a state of emergency, recently extended until June 1, that has effectively shuttered the economy and postponed the presidential elections originally slated for May 17. Under the PLD government's state of emergency order, 150,000 Haitian migrant workers have had their temporary legal status suspended, forcing them to return to Haiti, often via unofficial border crossings.

In recent comments that highlight the chauvinist filth with which the Dominican elite has historically sought to deflect from its own reactionary policies, the government's health minister, Rafael Sánchez Cárdenas, referred to Haitians as a "major threat to the Dominican Republic from a health point of view."

Haiti is a country with a long history of endemic poverty and brutal dictatorships in which the vast chasm between the tiny ruling elite and the broad masses has acquired the most grotesque forms. From 1915 to 1934, the country was occupied by US Marines to protect sugar and banking interests in the United States. Subsequently, Haiti was ruled for nearly three

decades by the US-supported Duvalier dictatorship. After the 1991 election of Aristide, a former priest who emerged as the leader of a movement for moderate democratic reforms during the last years of the Duvalier dictatorship, Haiti experienced another series of military coups orchestrated from Washington.

The current Tèt Kale government of Jovenel Moïse, who came to power through rigged elections in 2016, has been characterized by brazen corruption and the widespread use of armed gangs to carry out assassinations of political opponents and intimidate the working masses.

In July of 2018, mass demonstrations calling for the ouster of Moïse erupted throughout Haiti. For more than a year, tens of thousands of working people repeatedly took to the streets in cities across the country, often in violent clashes with the police, to protest rising inflation and brutal austerity measures imposed by the government under the dictates of the IMF. These included the elimination of state subsidies for fuel.

Protesters also demanded the resignation of Moïse for his role in an embezzlement scandal involving as much as \$2 billion in PetroCaribe funds earmarked for infrastructure development projects that were never carried out. Some of these funds were funneled to President Moïse himself through a construction company he owns that was awarded state contracts.

The PetroCaribe program, started by Venezuela's former president Hugo Chávez in 2005, when the country faced favorable conditions on the world market, entailed the heavily subsidized sale of petroleum to governments in the region with deferred payment provisions. These governments would then resell the oil on the international market at margins allowing them to pay for infrastructure projects and social programs.

The Trump administration's use of the pandemic as a cover to repatriate a notorious CIA henchman like Constant under conditions of guaranteed immunity is a clear signal to the ruling Moïse government in Haiti. Washington is green lighting the stepped-up use of extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, torture and rape in an attempt to crush the struggles of the working masses in Haiti.



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