

Five Haitian migrants dead, dozens rescued as US escalates its anti-immigrant policies

Alex Johnson
2 August 2022

Several incidents recently have pointed to the horrendous circumstances facing impoverished and desperate Haitian migrants who have been forced to take deadly sea voyages, confirming once again that hardly a week goes by without a shocking disaster caused by capitalism.

This reality was on full display last week when five Haitian migrants drowned and 68 others were left stranded Thursday after being dropped off from a boat in waters near Mona Island, west of Puerto Rico. Federal and local authorities who spotted the migrants identified 41 men and 25 women who survived.

Authorities searched the area near the uninhabited island for several hours after receiving a call from agents with the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, who first spotted the migrants. The sailors who led the migrants onboard fled the scene along with the boat, according to officials.

Many of the vessels carrying Haitian migrants that travel to Puerto Rico often depart from the neighboring Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti. Some of the vessels wind up capsizing in the treacherous Mona Passage that separates the two islands while others are dropped off prematurely in tiny uninhabited islands before reaching Puerto Rico, leaving many stranded without food or resources.

While the exact causes of Thursday's unexpected drop-off are unclear, immigration officials noted that the exploitation of migrants, including offering trips on makeshift vessels in exchange for cash, is not uncommon. US Coast Guard spokesman Ricardo Castrodad said following the incident, "Smugglers are there to make a profit, and they are not concerned about your well-being." He continued, "They were left at the mercy of their ability to reach shore."

In late May, 842 Haitians were rescued from a boat off Cuba's north coast, where they had been abandoned by the lead voyagers. Although many Haitian nationals who arrive in Cuba are not officially reported, in recent months Cuban authorities in Havana have acknowledged an increase in migrants reaching its shores. On Saturday, a group of 141 Haitian migrants were found stranded on Cuba's southern coast, as part of a series of large-scale efforts by Haitians to flee the country's insufferable and violent conditions.

According to the head of Red Cross Operations in Cienfuegos, Cuba, Nadiezka Carvajal, of the people traveling on the boat, over capacity and in precarious conditions, 22 were children and there were also pregnant women and elderly people. Testimony from one of the trip's castaways revealed that the objective was to reach Florida, with the closest distance from Cuba just 91 nautical miles, but the voyage was imperiled as a result of tumultuous weather.

Thursday's deadly event came barely a week after 17 Haitian migrants were found dead and 25 others were rescued in the Bahamas after their boat overturned and sank while attempting to reach US shores. Two months prior, 11 Haitian women drowned and 38 others were rescued after their boat capsized near Puerto Rico. Eight of the survivors had been taken to a Puerto Rican hospital and treated for serious injuries.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials are also reporting a substantial growth in Cuban migration amid an acute economic crisis on the island. More than 140,000 Cubans have been detained from October to May, a tenfold increase from the fiscal year 2020, according to the CBP. The recent wave is greater than the Mariel boat-lift of 1980, when 125,000 Cubans fled the island.

Widely viewed video footage taken by a Carnival Cruise passenger last week captured 12 Cuban migrants stranded at sea before being rescued by the ship. The ship's passengers, who were heading back to Port Miami, Florida, revealed that the migrants were at sea for five days and lost communication with their families. According to CBP officials, 21 migrants arrived in different parts of the Florida Keys.

The Biden administration is responding to the growing humanitarian crisis in the Caribbean with an escalation of detentions and rapid deportations of refugees. The US Coast Guard's Tampa Cutter repatriated 109 Haitians to Cap-Haitien, Haiti, Saturday, following an interdiction near Cay Sal Bank.

Connor Ives, Lieutenant for the Coast Guard's seventh district, warned Haitians against making "illegal voyages" to the US. "Anyone attempting to enter the US illegally by sea should expect to be repatriated once interdicted," Ives declared. On Saturday, a Coast Guard crew repatriated 83 Cuban refugees back to Cuba following several recent interdictions off the Florida Keys.

The transformation of the Caribbean into a watery graveyard, only a few hundred miles from US shores, is one element of the barbaric and politically driven nature of the anti-immigrant policies of the American ruling class, and exposes the hypocrisy and cynicism of the Biden administration and Democratic Party.

President Joe Biden's election was billed as a progressive achievement that would bring about social reform and a leftward shift away from the openly fascistic approach of Donald Trump. Instead, Biden has accelerated the attacks on immigrants and continued the discrimination and xenophobia that was the hallmark of his predecessor and Trump's fascist policymaker Stephen Miller.

Just nine months after Biden's election victory, US Border Patrol agents on horseback launched a vicious attack against Haitian migrants who had taken shelter under a freeway overpass in Del Rio, Texas. Biden then ordered the thousands of refugees dragged from the makeshift camp and sent back in a wave of mass deportations that continue to this day.

Biden and the Democrats have since then presided over the extension of the inhumane Title 42 mass expulsions introduced under Trump. This is a violation of international and domestic law, the rejection of the right to asylum for thousands, is leading to a surge of immigrant deaths and injuries along the US-Mexico border. In late June, 46 undocumented immigrants were found dead in a freight trailer, asphyxiated after escaping abysmal economic conditions in Central America produced by over a century of US imperialist exploitation.

The anti-immigrant restrictions imposed by the current Democratic

administration are far from unique. Biden was, after all, vice president during the presidency of Barack Obama, whose legacy as “Deporter-In-Chief” saw the apprehension of one million Central American immigrants and the deportation of more than 800,000, an amount that dwarfs all other administrations.

The history of repression against Haitian refugees can be traced back decades to Democratic and Republican administrations alike, as the capitalist class dictated that the utmost brutality be meted out to this highly exploited section of the international working class.

The 1970s witnessed a growing number of Haitians fleeing social misery and violence at the hands of the three-decades-long US-backed Duvalier dictatorship and its vicious paramilitary forces. In response, Democratic President Jimmy Carter established the so-called Haitian Program, a reactionary and racist policy which placed newly arrived Haitians in local jails, denied them employment and applied a blanket denial of their asylum claims. Carter also sought the repatriation of Haitians in droves, returning them to Haiti to face unbridled torture under the Duvalier regime.

Carter administration officials were unequivocal that their aim was to deny Haitians their right to asylum. A high-ranking Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) official said at the time, “the most practical deterrent to this problem [was] expulsion from the United States.” The INS classified most detained Haitians as “economic migrants” and many were quickly repatriated to Haiti despite the violent political repression of the military dictatorship.

In 1980, federal judge James Lawrence King struck down Carter’s measure and called the administration’s treatment of Haitians “discriminatory acts” against “the first substantial flight of black refugees,” and all “part of a program to expel Haitians.” King asserted that the US government’s prejudgment decisions discriminated against refugees and violated their right to claim asylum and to due process.

Carter’s successor, Republican President Ronald Reagan continued the practice of jailing Haitian refugees, a major goal being to intimidate and dissuade more of them from traveling to the US. Haitians already living in the US were also detained and confined until they could be expelled from the country.

Reagan sought to maneuver around King’s court decision as he introduced the practice of “interdiction,” meaning the United States could intercept migrant boats before they could reach American shores and deprive them of the ability to claim asylum. During George H.W. Bush’s presidency, Haitian asylum seekers who had been intercepted by the US Coast Guard were taken to six overcrowded camps at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

From 1991 to 1993 there emerged the “Haitian Refugee Crisis,” when the US Coast Guard was instructed to grab an outflow of Haitian refugees and take them to the Guantanamo camps. In the early 1990s more than 32,000 Haitian men, women and children fled the country after democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown in a coup backed by the US intelligence agencies and replaced by Henri Namphy’s brutal junta.

During the eight months that Aristide was in power the number of Haitians who fled was reduced by a third. Six weeks after Aristide was overthrown, at least 1,500 Haitians had been killed. In the decade prior to Aristide being overthrown, 25,000 Haitians were intercepted at sea by U.S coastal officials. One year after the coup 38,000 refugees were intercepted.

In May 1992, Bush announced the Kennebunkport Order aimed at slowly emptying the refugee camps and which instructed the Coast Guard not to bring Haitians to Guantanamo. But this elicited condemnations from human rights organizations because of its blatant violation of the Geneva Conventions’ treatment of refugees. The new policy prioritized returning refugees to Haiti who had left to escape political persecution,

thus making their return a death sentence at the hands of the blood-drenched Namphy regime.

An element of this infamous history was Camp Bulkeley, one of the two encampments which held about 270 refugees approved for asylum who tested positive for HIV or were related to someone with HIV at the camp. The US government demonstrated a staggering and criminal indifference to infected detainees, with many denied basic treatment for the life-threatening disease. In March 1993, US District Judge Sterling Johnson Jr. deemed the facility an “HIV prison camp” and ruled that the ‘government either had to provide medical treatment for those with the AIDS virus or send them where they could be treated.”

The refugees endured lengthy detention as no push was made to move their asylum claims forward. US courts declared that detained Haitians had “no substantive rights” under federal law. Virtually all refugees were subjected to horrid treatment, as most slept on cardboard or bare ground and others on cots. The food provided was inedible and their living conditions were squalid and lacked proper infrastructure for sanitation.

Karma Chavez, an associate professor and researcher at the University of Texas, Austin, wrote, “These refugees lived in deplorable conditions, were subjected to violence and repression by the US military, deprived of proper medical care, and left without any legal recourse of rights.”

Haitian detainees who protested the camp’s abhorrent conditions and demanded their right to due process were punished with solitary confinement, and women were forced to undergo abusive and degrading physical examinations. “When we protested,” one detainee recalled, “I was beaten...made to sleep on the ground like animals, like dogs, not like humans.”

President Biden has all but reprised the lies of Bill Clinton, who promised during his presidential campaign against Bush that he would make it easier for Haitians to apply for political asylum and end the “cruel policy of returning Haitian refugees to a brutal dictatorship without an asylum hearing.”

But when it became apparent that hundreds of thousands of Haitians were preparing to sail to US shores following Clinton’s electoral victory, the Democratic president quickly reversed course and said Haitians who fled by boat would be intercepted and returned to the island. In a taped video broadcast aimed at browbeating political refugees, Clinton declared that “leaving by boat is not the route to freedom” and that there would be no alteration in the policy of forced returns.

The barbaric treatment of Haitian refugees demolishes every effort of the US political establishment to lecture the world on “human rights.” American capitalism’s domestic crimes correspond with its unflinching endorsement of the bloodthirsty dictatorships in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two regimes that murder and torture their civilians regularly. Alongside that is the US-instigated military conflicts and provocations directed against Russia and China which have already killed thousands in Ukraine and risks triggering a global conflagration that would kill hundreds of millions if not billions.

Haitians and other migrants risking their lives to make the perilous journey to the US are impoverished workers, rural toilers, and ruined small businesspeople that have faced savage oppression under US-backed dictatorships and super-exploitation by transnational corporations.

The nationalism promoted by capitalist governments is discredited by the fact that workers in both the advanced and low-income countries are facing declining living standards and unbearable inflation as result of the ruling class’s policies. The defense of democratic rights and ensuring a decent living for all requires that the international working class tap into its immense social power and unite across national boundaries in the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact