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Dominican Republic Bearing Brunt Of Haiti Insurrection

by LADB Staff

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Geographically speaking, there is another side to Haiti. It is the Dominican Republic, the other sovereign nation on the island of Hispaniola. Already feeling the heat of a Haiti at full boil, the Dominican Republic has begun to reinforce its borders against the prospect of millions of desperate, hungry refugees. The Dominican army took this step after one of its soldiers was killed, at least five others wounded, and their weapons stolen. The assailants and their nationalities were unknown to authorities, but the incident was sufficient to get Dominican President Hipolito Mijia thinking security and making statements about defending the border and setting limits.

On a visit to the border at Dejabon, he said he would not tolerate "any kind of disrespect to the Haitian democracy, nor to its government" from his side of the border. "I gave instructions to the military that conspirators who come and go [across the border] be arrested. Our border is Dominican, and here we are the ones who rule. Under no circumstance will we permit our dignity and our own nationality to be toyed with. State security is established here to defend the country."

Guy Phillippe is back

The show of patriotic fervor in the absence of a known perpetrator was marred somewhat since it became known internationally that Guy Phillippe, former Haitian chief of police and political refugee in the Dominican Republic, has crossed the border to lend his efforts to the task of toppling Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Dominican newspapers have railed against Phillippe's exploitation of the porous border, calling it "an affront to our country, which took him in." The Dominican Republic had, at the time, made guarantees to Haiti that Phillippe would not be a danger to that country.

Now that he has appeared in Haiti in the company of an armed band that has promised to take the capital by the end of February, the Dominican newspaper *Diario Libre* asked editorially on Feb. 7 why pretty much everyone except the authorities knew what he was up to and how, if he was under the custody of Dominican authorities and the border is so well controlled, he could appear as he did on the other side.

The paper concluded, "The presence of this gentleman in Haitian territory in conspiratorial labors can be interpreted, at the least, as a blunder, but with the complicity of the authorities. Let's filter the coffee clear so that the Haitian crisis doesn't bounce back over here any more than it has to."

Ten days later, without ever answering the questions posed by the paper, Dominican Foreign Minister Francisco Guerrero was calling on the "international community" to act "with a greater sense of urgency" in the matter. "It is time," he said, "that the international community, the multilateral credit organizations, and friendly governments act with a greater sense of urgency in the face of an ever more acute crisis whose outcome could be prejudicial to the entire region."

Guerrero was clearly worried that, without outside help, if Haiti were allowed to flounder alone, it would be the Dominican Republic that would be left to "shoulder alone the weight of the consequences of the Haitian crisis."

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asked Caribbean countries to accept Haitian refugees on Feb. 17. The Dominican Republic would be first in line, were that to become necessary, but UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond has said that other Caribbean countries have offered to share the load. The US quickly made it clear that it was not one of those countries, nor was it willing to intervene. "There is, frankly, no enthusiasm right now for sending in military or police forces to put down the violence that we are seeing, said Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Differential Permeability

But signaling a possible rationale for the osmotic Dominican border, White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters, "There certainly needs to be some changes in the way Haiti is governed and the security situation as well. We call on President Aristide to make sure he implements those essential steps to address those matters." Said Powell, "We cannot buy into the proposition that the elected president must be forced out of office by thugs and those who do not respect the law." At about the same time Powell spoke, back at the border, the Haitian Liberation Front was circulating fliers saying that Dominicans "treat us like slave-beasts. Their plantations, their houses, their women and their daughters will be ours. This will be the punishment of the gods for subjecting our defenseless race to slavery and discrimination. To them, the racist Dominican slavers, we will cut off their heads with our machetes and drink their filthy blood as a sacrifice to the voodoo gods." The rest of the text went on to claim the Dominican Republic as Haitian property.

Dominican Gen. Radhames Zorrilla responded to the provocation by placing it in its historical context, denying any mistreatment of Haitians, but reiterating that his forces were there to prevent eight or nine million Haitian refugees from violating Dominican sovereignty. He said the country lacked the means to give refuge to all Haitians who might want to cross the border. The general also ordered his commanders to keep tight control on their troops and the civilian population to avoid their taking revenge on Haitians for the killing of Dominican troops who were locals. Schools were closed and the weekly market shut down.

Adding drama and tension, rumors circulated that Haitians were going to kidnap Dominican children. A more vulnerable Dominican site is the free-trade zone at Ounaminthe, Haiti. A Dominican garment-assembly factory (maquila) opened there last year with the prospect of more being funded by the International Finance Corporation (IFC). There followed reports of violent attacks on Haitian workers, abductions, and unfair dismissals; in short, activities that fit, however loosely, the descriptions in the Haitian Liberation Front fliers.

Reports from the maquila operator, Grupo M, have said that there has been no violence there so far. About 600 Haitians work under supervision of 32 managers of both nationalities. A formally worded announcement assured the public that all was proceeding normally, almost everyone was on the job, and no extraordinary measures had been taken "except those strictly necessary to prevent any eventual incident that puts in danger the security of our valued employees." Masked Haitians did,

however, attempt to penetrate the security fence that surrounds the maquila the previous Sunday, when no workers were present, and traded shots with security personnel.

Potential for border violence may increase in the coming days when, according to Director of Migration for the Northern Region Sabas Burgos, the Dominican Republic will expel large numbers of Haitians. The deportation, called a "massive repatriation," will focus on undocumented Haitians. "The places where they are located have already been found, and it is a question of days before the deportations begin," said Burgos. The operation will be coordinated with the Second Brigade of the Ejercito Nacional.

The Haitian crisis has also become an issue in the Dominican election campaign. Opposition candidate Eduardo Estrella has called the international community "negligent" in its response to Haiti's problems and said it must help Santo Domingo with the job of dealing with the issues. Estrella is the candidate of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC), the party of six-time former President Joaquin Balaguer, and he is running second in the polls for the May 16 presidential elections. He called the situation "very grave, dangerous, and of unforeseeable consequences for our country." "If the border has to be sealed, then let it be done, but we can't let the avalanche of desperate Haitians continue to cross over here in search of better horizons," he said.

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