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Dominican Refugees Fleeing Economic Crisis

by LADB Staff

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Its economy on the rocks, the Dominican Republic is now a major contributor to the hoards of boat people adrift in the Caribbean, rivaling its island mate, Haiti. Dominicans are dying out there in impressive numbers.

They are fleeing their country's worst economic crisis in decades. The inflation rate is fast approaching 30%. Unemployment is conservatively estimated at 16%. Frequent blackouts darken the nights. Since the 1990s, the peso has fallen from 16 to the US dollar to a most recent 45 to the dollar (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20). Many have headed for Puerto Rico, where 7,000 Dominicans have been placed in detention since Oct. 1, double the number for the previous 12 months.

The Mona Passage is an 80-mile-wide channel between Puerto Rico and the island of Hispaniola where the powerful Atlantic and Caribbean currents meet. Sharks abound there. Columbus and Ponce de Leon visited there. Now Dominicans die there.

Rescues uncoordinated US Immigration and Customs Enforcement patrol, search, and occasionally save people from capsized vessels. Searching for 20, they rescued 12 in July. Reports say more than 100 have died there this year. US Coast Guard spokesman Lt. Eric Willis said the published numbers are far too small. "Hundreds of people have probably lost their lives in the past several months."

On Aug. 4, Coast Guard patrols were searching for more than 90 people who were reported missing. On Aug. 10, their boat, with 39 survivors, was found by fishers in Puerto Rico just 45 km from where they left on July 29. Reports from the Dominican Republic say they departed Bahia de Samana, 350 km north of Santo Domingo, in a fragile yola, or yawl. Most passengers were from Villa Riva and Arenoso in Duarte province, near Samana. "We receive reports at least on a weekly basis from family members claiming that their loved ones have not made it to Puerto Rico," Willis said. "That is why we have a constant presence in the Mona Passage, knowing that people are making these dangerous trips in unseaworthy vessels."

Rescue efforts are complicated by a lack of cooperation on the part of Dominican authorities, according to family members of the voyagers. "My husband and I called the [Dominican] navy, and the answer they gave us was, 'Why didn't you call us when they were about to leave,'" said a relative, Ramona Nunez. "I told them it's not our job to guard the coast, it's theirs."

Stay home, stay poor, stay alive

The US State Department sponsors ads on billboards, taxis, even beer coasters showing, among other things, floating coffins with the slogan, "These illegal trips are trips to death." Makeshift vessels are not the only reason migrants find themselves treading these waters. Seaborne human

traffickers (coyotes) throw them overboard when it suits them, according to US Border Patrol spokesman Victor Colon, who gets his information from survivors. The Border Patrol does not rely only on shipwrecks to find and detain Dominicans. They also pick up the easily identified refugees in Puerto Rico.

Authorities estimate that only about 30% ever make it to Puerto Rico, where, upon landing, they hide, sometimes for days, in coastal thickets. The Border Patrol pursues them even there, hacking through the dense growth with machetes. Puerto Rico is the favored destination for the Dominicans. Spanish is spoken there, the economy gets an annual US\$14 billion boost from the US, and there are jobs the Puerto Ricans disdain in domestic service, construction, and other sectors. Also, an estimated 200,000 Dominicans already live there, among 4 million locals.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has emphasized its concern for economic migrants, not only in the Caribbean, but worldwide. The Geneva-based organization has noted an increase in these migrations and says there are no international agreements to regulate or protect them. The head of the ILO international-migration division, Manolo Abella of the Philippines, says they are working on "the development of a nonbinding multilateral framework for managing migration [that would be] acceptable to most countries." The ILO points to the severely unbalanced distribution of the economic benefits of the globalized world economy.

ILO director general Juan Somavia of Chile said, not surprisingly, the structural failure is that globalization does not create enough jobs where people live. "The world must find a way to create decent jobs for this vast flow of migrants, through multilateral action and policy," he observed. The world economy has so skewed migration flows that there are now more doctors from Ghana and Jamaica working in the US than there are working in those two countries. An alternative to death by drowning and shark attack has opened, however so slightly.

Under the provisions of the Acuerdo de Regulacion de Flujos Migratorios signed between the Dominican Republic and Spain in 2001, a first group of 336 workers will travel to Spain to take jobs, substandard for Spaniards, in domestic service, as waiters, kitchen help, in elevator installation, bricklaying, and plumbing. They are scheduled to leave Aug. 15, to be followed by another group on Aug. 30 and another in September. These relatively few workers were picked from among 10,467 who applied, 7,869 women and 2,596 men. Unskilled workers will earn about 542 euros a month, waiters from 654 to 1,000 euros, cooks between 700 and 1,000, and the elevator installers will get between 920 and 1,500 euros (1 euro is approximately US\$1.22). The Spanish employers will be many small businesses, Grupo Sigla, and Thyssenkrupp Elevators.

At home in the Dominican Republic, another possibility of an improved employment situation opened with President Hipolito Mejia's Aug. 7 announcement of the startup of 138 new businesses, national and international, on the border, using joint private and government funds. Mejia said the companies were attracted by incentives and concessions provided by law 28-01, which the Congreso Nacional has sought to repeal, he hastened to add. The president, whose term is about to expire, said 43 of these companies have begun operations, and the rest are in process. He said together, they would generate 28,000 new jobs. The investment, totaling about US\$5.8 million, was channeled through the Consejos de Coordinacion Zona Especial de Desarrollo Fronterizo and will

finance companies in border locations, including Monte Cristi, Independencia, Dajabon, Santiago Rodriguez, Bahoruco, Pedernales, and Elias Pina.

Mejia said he hopes the new workplaces will slow the migrations of the even more desperate Haitians to the capital. The companies will be run by Dominican, Canadian, Cuban, US, British, Spanish, Venezuelan, Peruvian, Haitian, Israeli, Italian, Taiwanese, Arab, French, and Argentine investors. The industries will include fruit and avocado cultivation and processing, manufacturing of solar panels, air conditioners, stoves, freezers, washing machines, cement, fencing materials, road signs, chicken and egg production, mining, and transportation services. The list also includes paper goods, value-added processing, clothing, marine and dry-dock services, tourism, beverages, industrial equipment, and alternative-energy manufacture.

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