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Dominican Republic Wants Haitians Out

by LADB Staff

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The Senate of the Dominican Republic has passed a resolution to request that the government deport Haitians living illegally in the country. The measure asks President Leonel Fernandez to order immigration and police authorities to determine the status of Haitians in the country and deport the illegal Haitians.

The resolution read in part, "The streets, avenues, highways, the country, and the city are filled with Haitian nationals." Official estimates are that there are around one million Haitians fitting the description (see NotiCen, 2004-04-01). The author of the resolution, Sen. Enrique Reyes, said the border had turned into "a no man's land," with Haitians crossing "as if it were the door to their house."

Armed Forces Minister Sigfrido Pared responded on national TV that border control is "difficult." Deportations are already taking place at the rate of about 100 a day through Dajaban, and 211 undocumented Haitians are imprisoned in Santiago. A human rights issue on both sides Pared said that, with the backing the resolution provides, the deportations and arrests would continue and that human rights would be respected.

President of the Comité Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) Virgilio Almanzar in the Dominican Republic had concerns for rights issues on both sides of the border. He had charged in mid-October that instigators of violence in Haiti use the Dominican Republic as a hideout. "They come here as refugees but then go there to Haiti to crush the Haitians," said Almanzar. He said they use the country like a trampoline to plan actions and then bounce back to Haiti to carry them out.

Almanzar had asked President Fernandez to launch an investigation on the situation of refugees. "We have to remember that Haiti is a nation, a sovereign country," said Almanzar. "We can't keep allowing this situation." He named Guy Philippe, the anti-Aristide rebel, as one of those who terrorize in Haiti, then return to the Dominican Republic as refugees.

Haitian consul in the Dominican Republic Joseph Mathurin did not deny Almanzar's view. "Could be," he said. "I don't reject his opinion." Despite the action in the Senate, roundup and repatriation will not be a simple task. Pared said the armed forces could not undertake a massive deportation. "What is happening is that the armed forces cannot by themselves deport Haitians, or any other nationals, unless [deportation] is controlled by the migration authorities." Reyes agreed the process, to be constitutional, would have to pass through a chain of authority and would have to conform to international migratory treaties as well.

Anarchic border control

Also in doubt is who controls the border. Reyes observed that there is a "power vacuum" on the Haitian side, an "anarchic situation" preventing any border control on the part of the Haitians. Haitian rebels, answerable to no state authority, have shown their ability to control the border for periods of time. On Nov. 9 they took over a customs post demanding liberation for their compatriots locked up in Dominican jails. Dominican truckers said the rebels appeared to be, by their uniforms, members of the disbanded Haitian military. The rebels permitted them to cross, bringing merchandise to Cap Haitien and other communities accessible from the Dajabon border.

Trucker Julio Ruiz told reporters that, to get through, a group of drivers met and negotiated with the rebels the night before to bring much needed food and other goods into the country. The week before, the border was closed by a group of Dominicans, enraged by the kidnap, a day earlier, of a Dominican boy by Haitians who later demanded a ransom. The Dominicans took a Haitian policeman hostage in return. The child was eventually returned, some Haitians were beaten senseless, and the binational market in Ouanaminthe, on which local residents depend for provisions, was cancelled. Ouanaminthe lies on the Haitian side, just 600 meters from Dajabon. Added together, the complications attendant on the expulsion of a million Haitians make the probability of anything like that actually happening small. But there are still more complications; the Haitians have nowhere survivable to go in their own country, no one else wants them, and Haitian-on-Haitian violence ensures that their country will not become a viable habitat in the foreseeable future.

Hard-line from Canada

Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin made that last point clear on his mid-November visit to Haiti. Speaking to a group of leaders of political parties and factions at a meeting at the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince, he told his bitterly divided audience, "The international community has made considerable efforts to come to Haiti's aid, but it will not be able to meet these commitments without a national reconciliation of all of you, all Haitians. You can't have one without the other." Martin's message, intended to be a get-tough change in policy, drew hesitant approval from his listeners.

Former senator of deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's La Fanmi Lavalas party Gerard Gilles responded with an admission that "Lavalas committed uncontrolled abuses. I have the courage to admit it. But there are people on the other side who have also committed uncontrolled abuses. We should get together to correct this. The social fabric of Haiti is torn."

From the other side, Andre Apaid of the Group of 184, Aristide antagonists instrumental in his ouster, agreed, but doubted reconciliation would work, given a 200-year history of misunderstanding. Martin retorted, "Reconciliation does not mean that you have to love each other, just that you work together. In the Parliament of Canada there is a reconciliation but I assure you it doesn't mean we love each other." Others expressed similar reservations.

Evans Paul, former mayor of Port-au-Prince, thought that it would be complicated and that "there has to be a will for Haitians to sit down and talk. It mustn't be under the influence of a foreign government." Martin said he was "very, very, encouraged" by the responses and by the fact that the

meeting was the first time since Aristide left that Lavalas representatives had been able to be heard. The prime minister had been lobbied heavily in Canada by representatives of the tens of thousands of pro-Aristide Haitians living in Canada. These expatriates have accused the Canadian government of colluding with the US and France to force Aristide from office.

In the US, strong indications are that the government will add to Haiti's chaos by deporting an estimated 20,000 undocumented Haitians. In the view of Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, "The message of our president to the Haitians is absolutely clear. Your lives don't count." Little's organization has been advocating Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the Haitians. This position has bipartisan support from South Florida congressional members and at least partial backing from Gov. Jeb Bush. The president's brother wants TPS, but "in a way that doesn't create a huge influx of immigrants. We are not equipped to deal with the costs related to mass migration."

Rep Kendrick Meek (D-FL) wrote to President Bush last month, "It is long past time to put an immediate end to the deportation of Haitians from this country." Interim Prime Minister of Haiti Gerard Latortue also wrote Bush pleading for TPS, arguing that the combination of political violence and natural disasters had "rendered us temporarily unprepared to handle adequately the return of our nationals." The pleas seem to have been turned down, not formally, but with an announcement from the US Department of Homeland Security that Haitians' status would be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis and only for those from limited areas of Haiti directly affected by Hurricane Jeanne.

Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, after talking with Latortue in Miami, said that, in extending TPS, "we would end up taking people back to Port-au-Prince and making the situation worse" because TPS would set off an uncontrollable exodus of boat people.

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