Legalization of Immigrants Attracts Attention from International Community

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In July this year, two important international political figures visited the Dominican Republic. The president of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy visited the country from July 20 to July 23. The main reason for his visit was to celebrate the 25 years of political, diplomatic, economic, and cooperation ties between both parties.

This was Van Rompuy's first visit to the Dominican Republic. And, while various items were on his agenda such as the growing interest generated by the Dominican Republic and the country’s growing importance in international trade, during his visit he also talked about the need to solve the problem of legalizing immigrants through a "dialogue process."

Only five days before, the country had received the official visit of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, who had arrived from Haiti. The issues discussed were poverty-reduction strategies and how to strengthen relations with the UN (NotiCen, April 10, 2014).

However, Ban also mentioned the immigration issue in very positive terms. He said that, because of "the great mass that comes from Haiti," it is necessary to look for a solution based on "providing a form of national identification for Haitians who live and work in the Dominican Republic."

UN head praises naturalization law

Ban thanked the Dominican Republic for the bilateral aid it has given Haiti and the role it has played as an intermediary with the UN. In this sense, the UN secretary-general "welcomed" the approval of Law 169-14, the Ley de Régimen Especial de Naturalización y Regularización de Extranjeros (June 26, 2014), as he considers that this instrument "deals with the problems faced by Haitians and other foreigners."

"It is important to recognize that these people are Dominicans. I want to encourage the Dominican authorities to continue working to protect human rights," the secretary-general said. He also mentioned that strengthening bilateral relations was crucial for fostering the long-term social and economic development of both countries.

Regarding this point, Ban said that he trusts the leadership of the Dominican president as well as Haitian President Michel Martelly. Especially because a high-level commission was established to "strengthen and shape economic and social cooperation, as well as cooperation in customs and the fight against drugs."

The context of Van Rompuy’s visit was defined by a series of bilateral meetings that both governments have held to ease tensions after one of the longest periods of estrangement between the two in the last two decades, known as the "Constitutional Tribunal" case. This regards a number of meetings in which Venezuela acted as a mediator and European Union (EU) representatives participated as observers.
Law 169-14 and its first results

Minister of the Interior and the Police José Ramón Fadul, who coordinates the Plan Nacional para la Regularización de Extranjeros, provided information on the progress made in implementing the aforementioned law. He said that 96,000 people have been to the designated bureaus to present the necessary documents to be admitted as part of the plan. However, only 36,000 of those people had "some sort of document."

Fadul, who also presides the Comisión Nacional de Migración, said that 260 people, mostly Haitian, had presented the full dossier of documents, which were being checked. He added that, to date, only 17 people had completed the entire process and would obtain their nonresident status. Fadul emphasized that the people who show up are not presented with any obstacles and, when they do not have the correct documents, officials explain to them what they need to do so that they can return with the missing documents and conclude their application process.

A month ago, Fadul said that the team that would preside the Technical Unit that would enforce Law 169-14 had already been designated. The person responsible for this unit would be Samir Santos, who had served as executive director of the legalization plan.

On Aug. 6, it became known that the executive had already published decree 250-14, which contained the necessary ruling to enforce Law 169-14 since July 29.

However, even though the Dominican authorities, as well as a number of international representatives such as Van Rompuy and Ban, have expressed a certain degree of enthusiasm, on Aug. 20 a group of Haitian immigrants who worked in the Dominican sugar plantations marched to the Haitian Embassy in the Dominican Republic to demand that the ID cards be freely distributed.

Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported that these groups are demanding the necessary documents to be admitted under the national plan for the legalization of immigrants launched by the Dominican government. The demonstrators were accompanied by the Unión de Trabajadores Cañeros.

These workers explained to the press that they are unable to pay the fee required by the Haitian Embassy to obtain the documents necessary to be admitted under the plan. Prensa Latina said the Haitian government reduced the passport application fee to US$23, still very high for people such as pensioners who lack the necessary resources to pay the fee and are demanding that they should receive the documents free of charge.

Those involved are elderly Haitians who worked as manual laborers and are demanding a state pension that they have failed to receive so far because they do not have the necessary documents. They have been asked to present a Haitian passport so that they can receive their US$119 monthly pension. In a letter sent to Haitian Ambassador Fritz Sinéas, they demanded to be exonerated from making this payment as a way of "redressing" the "historic debt" that the Haitian government owes them.

The Haitian ambassador admitted that it is difficult for a poor country to issue free passports, but he said that he would inform President Martelly of the demands of the sugarcane workers. Jesús Núñez, president of the Unión de Trabajadores Cañeros, explained that the Haitian government signed a series of agreements allowing those immigrants to work in the Dominican plantations.

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The elderly sugarcane workers regard the national plan for the legalization of immigrants as an opportunity and are demanding support from their government to obtain the necessary documents to be admitted under this program.

For now, according to figures published by human rights organizations based on a UN survey, 210,000 Dominicans of Haitian origin could be affected by the order to cancel their nationality, even though the Dominican Civil Registry insists that the real figure is 13,000.

Estimates by UN agencies and other international human rights organizations indicate that most of those affected were never registered and thousands of people run the risk of becoming stateless and being deported.

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