Haitian Immigration Crisis Reaches New Heights

Crosby Girón
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by Crosby Girón
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Although the exodus of Haitian immigrants arriving in the Dominican Republic has been an ongoing problem throughout the past four decades, it has recently reached new heights. This is partly because the Dominican authorities wish to put an end to the arrival of Haitian immigrants and partly because the crisis has underscored tensions between the two countries that have acquired overtones of racism, discrimination, and violence, as reported by international organizations and human rights groups.

"If I don't belong here, where do I belong?" read the placards carried by a number of Haitian immigrants to express their fears and concerns as they undergo the regularization process to become Dominican nationals (NotiCen, Nov. 21, 2013, and April 10, 2014). Even though thousands of these Haitian immigrants were born in the Dominican Republic, their lack of documentation has left them in a legal limbo and facing the threat of deportation.

According to Amnesty International (AI), the deadline set by the Dominican authorities for Haitian immigrants to apply for residence elapsed in February. Until two years ago, the Dominican Republic granted citizenship to the children of Haitian immigrants born in the country. However, following a court decree in 2013 and other changes to immigration procedures, these children have been denied the right to be registered as Dominican nationals and to have Dominican birth certificates and ID cards (NotiCen, June 26, 2014).

This situation has left 20,000 people in a legal limbo as they are not recognized by either the Dominican or the Haitian authorities. Some of those problems are related to their basic rights. Long lines of "stateless people" can be seen in the Dominican immigration offices, many of whom were hoping to obtain residence permits.

Erika Guevara, Americas director for AI, told the local press that many of these people have lost hope of obtaining papers as the official deadline established by the Dominican authorities has elapsed.

The Dominican government says the legal changes seek to end the influx of undocumented immigrants from Haiti that originated more than a century ago (NotiCen, Aug. 9, 2012).

The UN and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) have pressured the Dominican government, which has given in, to an extent, by passing a law in May 2014 that would allow the children of undocumented persons to request residence permits, which would eventually allow them to obtain citizenship (NotiCen, Aug. 28, 2014).

Figures from the Dominican Ministerio de Interior y Policía, quoted by AI, indicated that at least 5% of 110,000 people who would qualify for residence have applied. Nevertheless, the Dominican authorities have continued to come under heavy criticism from human rights organizations, especially because they consider that there has been a lack of information and delays in setting up the bureaus in charge of processing applications.
The Dominican government has responded by saying that it has made great efforts to help the undocumented immigrants who are currently in a "legal limbo." Immigration director José Ricardo Taveras told the local press that more than 20 bureaus have been set up to process applications and that an information campaign was launched.

**Haitians call for end to racism and abuse**

Haitian demonstrators also carried placards that read "Beware, the Dominican Republic is a racist country" during a protest in late February in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. On that day, thousands of Haitians took to the streets to call for an end to what they regard as abuse and racism toward immigrants.

On the other hand, human rights groups such as Colectivo 4 de Diciembre have called for a boycott on Dominican groups as a means of protesting against the violation of Haitians’ rights. Other human rights organizations have asked the government to take the necessary steps to prevent and put an end to incidents of racism and violence against Haitians.

Civil rights groups have supported the protests, and hundreds of people supported the Haitian immigrants’ cause and held protests outside the Ministère des Affaires étrangères et des Cultes and surrounded the Dominican Embassy, according to press reports. As a result, the Haitian police were forced to cordon off the area surrounding the embassy to prevent a possible assault on the building.

During the protest, demonstrators also demanded that Dominican Ambassador Rubén Silié Valdez should take steps to punish those who promote xenophobic and racist attitudes toward Haitians. This mainly refers to the proposal put forward by a right-wing Dominican congressman to build a wall between the two countries to stop the influx of migrants (NotiCen, Oct. 24, 2013).

Demonstrators presented the authorities with a written statement summarizing their demands. They demanded respect for international conventions and rejected racism, hatred, and violence. Local press reports said they were demanding peace and respect. "We want to see clear signs that the authorities have a zero-tolerance policy toward ultranationalist groups, we want to see actions that punish this behavior and that serve as a deterrent so that these incidents are not repeated," read the statement.

One of the direct consequences of these demonstrations has been that the Haitian Ambassador to the Dominican Republic Fritz Cineas handed Foreign Minister Pierre Duly Brutus his resignation, as Haitian demonstrators have questioned the role he has played in the current crisis. Haitian immigrants have rebuked Cineas for the slowness with which the documents they need to apply for residence in the Dominican Republic have been processed.

The protests have marked a deterioration in the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Following the demonstrations outside the Dominican embassy in Port-au-Prince, Dominican Foreign Minister Andrés Navarro warned the Haitian government that the demonstrations had been "excessive" and would have a negative impact on diplomatic relations between the two neighbors. "Patience has its limits. Occupying the Dominican consulate in Port au Prince is unacceptable," he said.