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Haitians

Profile

Haitians constitute a significant minority within the Dominican Republic (DR). Estimates range between 650,000 and 1 million Haitians who live in the country. Several Haitian rights NGOs argue that the latter includes Haitians born in Haiti as well as their DR-born offspring.

There is continual migration between the two countries. Haitians migrate seeking work in the Dominican Republic, driven by high unemployment and low wages at home. Many work in sugar, coffee and cocoa production, but increasing numbers are also engaged throughout the country in construction, domestic work and the informal sector.

Discrimination

Haitian immigrants and their descendants in the DR face discrimination by the dominant society. There is a distinct preference in Dominican society for lighter-coloured skin, European physical features and related cultural values. However, being of African ancestry itself does not automatically confer a lower status.

In Dominican society - as in most of Latin America - the degree of discrimination is related to a blend of factors, including skin colour, clothing, family background, income/educational levels, cultural orientation, the accent used when speaking Spanish or whatever alternative language an individual uses.

Haitians are therefore stigmatized because of the combination of their dark skin colour, low income level/social ranking, clothing quality and especially because they have steadfastly retained many of their traditional ancestral cultural values and modes. Therefore they are seen as being not 'European' enough, and above all 'too African'.

All forms of Haitian culture, such as holidays, traditional African-based religious practices (Voodoo) and the Africanized French (Creole), are derided and socially discriminated against. Dominicans typically claim the existence of a distinct Haitian 'look', which usually consists of darker skin and shabby clothing.

Haitians are the poorest members of Dominican society. They earn 60 per cent less than average Dominicans. They often do not have access to proper nutrition or adequate health care due to poor pay, their illegal status and fear of deportation.

Employment

Most Haitians work in the lowest positions on the sugar plantations or construction sites, doing jobs Dominicans would never consider taking, for example planting and harvesting sugar cane.

Approximately 83 per cent of the sugar cane workers (*braceros*) in the DR are Haitian or of Haitian descent. Temporary migrants known as *ambafiles* (literally 'under the wire'), are recruited by Dominican agents (*buscones*), sometimes with promises of well-paid work, and are brought to the country illegally and undocumented, specifically to work in the sugar cane industry.

Conditions for DR agricultural workers in general are poor, particularly in the sugar industry. The situation sometimes

borders on being forced labour. Some Haitians living in the Dominican Republic are rounded up and forced - often at gunpoint - to work on the sugar plantations for less than US \$2.50 a day, if they are paid at all.

The amount of cane a worker cuts can vary. Haitian cane cutters are usually paid by the weight of harvested cane rather than the hours worked. Observers have noted that employers sometimes delay the dispatch of collection vehicles allowing the newly cut cane to first dehydrate and lose weight, thereby lowering the wages to be paid.

In various sugar cane industry shantytowns, field guards reportedly keep workers' clothes and documents to prevent them from leaving until the end of the harvest. Employers also withhold wages to keep workers in the fields. Anti-Slavery International, in particular, has criticized the Dominican authorities for tolerating and even encouraging coercive forms of labour.

Living conditions

The great majority of the sugar cane workers live in work camps or villages known as *bateyes*, which are notorious for their poor conditions.

Most sugar cane worker villages lack schools, medical facilities, or clean water, and sewage systems, and have high rates of disease. Company-provided housing is sub-standard. Many individuals sleep in barracks on iron beds without mattresses or on dirt floors in 10 ft by 9 ft rooms shared by families of five or more. Sugar cane workers often do not receive the medical services or pensions that are due to them, even though these contributions are deducted from their pay.

Child labour is very common. Poor Haitian adolescents regularly accompany their parents to work in sugar cane fields. Children of 12 years old and younger also work during the planting season for as little as US \$1 per day, all with the tacit approval of the sugar companies.

Since the 1980s, international human rights campaigning has focused on the plight of Haitians who work in the Dominican sugar industry. Human rights NGOs, the Catholic Church, and activists all describe Haitian conditions in *bateyes* as modern-day slavery.

Legal status

Because of the extremely low status accorded Haitians in Dominican society, they are profiled and targeted by many social and law enforcement agencies. The military often uses unrestrained force when dealing with Haitian protesters. Many Haitians have been found dead along the border, and thousands of Haitians are illegally deported every year, usually without being able to tell their families.

Efforts by the authorities to manage the inflow of illegal Haitian immigrants also complicate the lives of those Haitians already in the country legally. Dominican police regulations permit the confiscation of vehicles offering transportation to illegal immigrants. This discourages bus and taxi drivers from picking up all darker-skinned persons, regardless of origin or legal status. In addition, round-ups aimed at ejecting illegal immigrants also end up expelling legal Haitian residents, not to mention darker Dominicans as well.

Documentation

There are considerable numbers of long-term Haitian residents in the Dominican Republic. Many of the men, known as *viejos*, have married Dominican women and have families, but few Dominican-Haitians are entitled to Dominican citizenship.

The Dominican civil registry routinely refuses to recognize or extend citizenship documents to many Dominican-born individuals of Haitian ancestry. Since many Haitian parents have never documented their own births, they are unable to demonstrate their own citizenship or that of their children.

A legal ordinance allows undocumented children to attend school up to the fifth grade. However, some school

administrators deny undocumented children access to school, particularly those who appear to be of Haitian ancestry.

NGOs report that undocumented Haitian children are denied school enrolment to a much greater degree than Dominican children who are similarly undocumented. Furthermore, when permitted to attend primary school, the children of poor Haitian parents, like poor Dominican children, rarely progress beyond the sixth grade.

False adoptions

In hopes of giving their children a better future some poor Haitian families arrange for Dominican families to 'adopt' and employ their children. The result is usually a form of indentured servitude for the 'adopted' children and adolescents. The Haitian children are never treated like full members of the family or allowed to attend school. Instead they are expected to work in the family house or businesses, often putting in long hours.

The Dominican government has been reported by human rights organizations for allowing the abuse of Haitians, including child labour. However any remedial action is usually only temporary.

Rights protection

Haitians are minimally mobilized politically. There are three organizations that represent Haitians locally, all of which rely on conventional political activities to advance migrant Haitian interests. Due to their precarious political situation and low economic status, Haitians have been very reluctant to mobilize in great numbers; neither are they likely to do so in the future.

One organization did stage a protest march in the spring of 2003 involving about 2,000 people in an effort to demonstrate their dissatisfaction over the continued denial of citizenship to Dominican-born children of Haitian descent. In general, mobilization by international human rights groups is usually more responsible for reducing local discrimination against Haitians. The government generally limits forced deportations or other practices only after international human rights organizations and/or the US exert pressure or publicize these practices.

Historical context

The relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti has a long and troubled history. Modern Dominican perceptions of Haiti are still coloured by the 22-year occupation by Haitian troops from 1822 to 1844.

Even though Haiti helped Dominican rebels regain their independence from Spain in 1865, policies enacted during the Haitian occupation encouraged enduring rancour. The measures included compulsory military services, Spanish language use restrictions, large-scale land expropriations and the compulsory production of export crops.

Migrant labour

In 1916 US forces occupied the Dominican Republic and the subsequent take-over of the local sugar industry by large US conglomerates expanded the Dominican sugar industry, creating a major boom. In the late 1920s the first Haitian *braceros* or cane-cutters were brought across the border. By 1935 the census recorded a Haitian population of 50,000.

The depression of the 1930s, and a precipitous drop in sugar prices, created a crisis in the industry. In October 1937, the Dominican dictator, General Rafael Trujillo, ordered the massacre of between 20,000 and 25,000 Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic.

Despite the massacre, subsequent Haitian governments signed contracts with the Dominican authorities, notably the State Sugar Council (CEA), allowing the recruitment of Haitian *braceros* in return for a per capita fee. Since the overthrow of the Duvalier dynasty (1957-86), these agreements have ceased.

Migration

As a result of the continued need for Haitian labour, estimates are that by 1980 more than 200,000 Haitians were

residing permanently or semi-permanently in the Dominican Republic.

In June 1991 several thousand Haitians were expelled after a series of critical human rights reports about Haitian migrants. And in August 1991 the Haitian Foreign Ministry claimed a further 15,000 fled to avoid the Dominican military,

However, the coup that overthrew President Aristide in September 1991 resulted in 70,000 Haitians escaping to the Dominican Republic, of whom fewer than 100 were recognized as political refugees by the Dominican government.

Current issues

Deportation

Haitians continue to immigrate in great numbers to the DR in search of economic opportunity, with many being repatriated. Migration authorities and security forces continued to conduct periodic sweeps throughout 2005 to locate and repatriate illegal migrants.

The government continues its policy of strict enforcement of documentary requirements and repatriation of individuals without papers on their person. Some deported Haitians charge they are denied the opportunity to demonstrate their legal status. Migration officials and security forces sometimes destroy and confiscate expellees' residency documents.

Furthermore, due to the summary nature of the process, deportees are also unable to arrange for the care of their families or property, or to express a credible fear of persecution or torture if returned to Haiti. However, in some cases, expellees with appropriate legal documents were allowed to return.

This could be partly due to the selective nature of the process. Due to the continued dependence on Haitian labour, military officers and other officials sometimes exercise discretion. Many regularly collect bribes in return for releasing individuals suspected of being irregular or undocumented. Government officials report that in June 2005 the president ordered the suspension of 'mass repatriations. Massive deportations of Haitians have slowed down, with 5,000 registered in the first five months of 2007 as opposed to an estimated 20,000 in 2006. Amnesty International has recommended that the Dominican government 'take measures to ensure that arrests and deportations by immigration officials and military personnel are conducted with due respect for human rights and the rule of law and that complaints of abuse are promptly, independently and impartially investigated'.

Amnesty International also urged the Dominican Republic to 'stop summary deportations and ensure that individual cases are examined fairly, and to ensure that all prosecutions of undocumented migrants are conducted with full respect for international human rights law' (in its report on the Dominican Republic, March 2007 - see [further reading](#)).

Documentation

After much international pressure, Haitians are now permitted to receive an education as the government has stopped requiring birth certificates for attending public schools. However, poverty continues to condemn many Haitian children to work instead of attending school, limiting chances to improve their social status.

After an international campaign and some internal pressure from Haitians, in April 2002 the Dominican government began a documentation process. The extent to which these policies have been implemented, and their impact on the treatment of Haitians, still remains to be seen.

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