

# Haitians find asylum in Jamaica

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"We will turn back any refugee that attempts to reach our shore, and that message needs to be very clear as well to the Haitian people," Bush said.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees described the statement as "the first time in more than 50 years that the U.S. has flagrantly rejected the legal and ethical obligation to protect refugees."

The policy has resulted in Washington returning 1,948 Haitians to their homeland in 2004, as of Apr. 26, already an increase over the 1,490 intercepted at sea in all of 2003, according to the Coast Guard.

USCR's director of communications Steven Forester says Haitian refugees long settled in the United States, some with U.S.-born children, also face similar drastic measures.

About three thousand asylum-seekers who arrived in the United States by plane in the 1980s and '90s (known now as "airplane refugees") are at risk of being deported because they were not included in a law — thanks to a drafting error — designed to regularize Haitian refugees who arrived before 1996, he explained in an interview.

Some "airplane refugees" have already been deported.

"If our policy ... is to send a deterrent signal to Haitians — 'we want you to stay there and not to flee because when you flee you not only risk your life but you tax our Coast Guard and border patrol resources that are needed in the "war on terror" — if that's our reasoning, (then) to deport people who are productive, contributing citizens here and productive, contributing remittances (to Haiti) not only adds an extra mouth to feed in Haiti but cuts off five times their number."

"Some of them are going to be desperate and seek to flee to the U.S.," says Forester.

A bill has been introduced in the U.S. Senate that would give the "airplane refugees" the same status as other Haitians who arrived by sea during the same period.

Yet according to the USCR, nearly 30,000 Haitians have asylum claims pending in the United States. Many of them have been detained indefinitely, "often in harsh conditions", as part of the government's deterrent policy.

Refugee advocacy group Church World Service is urging supporters to write Bush requesting that Haitian refugees be granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

That would "permit Haitians, presently in the United States, to reside here and qualify for work authorization for 18 months. It would thus guarantee their safety until there is political stability and an end to the armed conflict in that country", says the group's website.

"TPS program was established to provide protection to people who are temporarily unable to return to their homelands because of a serious ongoing armed conflict — exactly the situation in Haiti now. Please speak out to affirm the United States tradition of caring for and protecting persons in vulnerable situations," it adds.

Celbern Oats is commanding officer of the Port Antonio chapter of the Salvation Army in Jamaica, one of the organizations in Portland parish that has been providing relief for the Haitians.

He says the welcoming attitude of local residents is mirrored by the wider Jamaican society.

"I've lived overseas and I realize that Jamaicans are the most generous of people," he told IPS.

After they land in the parish, the refugees are processed by immigration officials, examined by medical staff, provided with translators, and transported to designated shelters. Existing shelters are now full, and the government has been equipping facilities better suited for the indefinite stays that might lie ahead for the asylum-seekers.

The Jamaican government has stressed that it has no choice but to accept the refugees, in accordance with its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

But Jamaican Prime Minister Percival Patterson has said repeatedly that there is more to his administration's position than legal obligations, often referring to Haitians as his "brothers and sisters" and saying that he could not, in good conscience, turn away anyone seeking safe harbor and protection from persecution.

Delano Franklyn, state minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, says the country is bound by both a legal and moral imperative.

"Jamaica has always accepted the fact that (independence) in Haiti in 1804 to a large extent influenced what happened in Jamaica. Jamaica and Haiti have always had a very close relationship over the years; this has been reflected in the number of deposed leaders who have sought refuge here, and Jamaica was very influential in Haiti becoming a member of CARICOM (the Caribbean Community)," Franklin told IPS.

Ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has been in Jamaica since March. He and Jamaican officials stress the stay is temporary, and rumors have Aristide — who continues to insist he was kidnapped Feb. 29 in a plot orchestrated by the United States and France — taking permanent exile in South Africa, though Pretoria has not confirmed that.

Columnist John Maxwell of Jamaica's Sunday Observer, whose writings have been severely critical of the Bush administration's actions towards Haiti, describes the U.S. stance toward Haitian refugees as "not civilized".

"The world has always recognized that there are people you have to give sanctuary to, people fleeing from persecution," he told IPS. "We have been doing that for years, I can't understand why the U.S. thinks there can be a difference between Cubans escaping and Haitians escaping."

The United States continues to welcome most asylum-seekers fleeing communist-run Cuba.

Accommodating the refugees has strained Jamaica's resources, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recently announced it is awarding Kingston 500,000 U.S. dollars to assist in their care.

Director of the UNHCR's Bureau for the Americas, Hope Hanlan, told Radio Jamaica recently the agency has been very impressed

with Jamaica's response.

"Not only has the high commissioner addressed a letter to Prime Minister Patterson congratulating him on the exemplary attitude of Jamaica towards this refugee crisis, but also we've been very impressed with the rapid creation of a sub-committee uniting all of the various ministries in order to make sure that the needs are well identified by professionals, and that the needs are expressed to the U.N. so that we can help the government," Hanlan said.

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