

The Refugee Voice

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Photo courtesy of JRS-Dominican Republic

No Refuge: Haitian Refugee Women in the Dominican Republic

Haiti shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Although both countries struggle economically, the disparity in wealth and development between the Dominican Republic and its environmentally devastated, impoverished and politically unstable neighbor has spurred thousands of Haitian migrants and asylum seekers across the Dominican border.

HAITIANS SEEK REFUGEE PROTECTION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Haiti's current lack of central government control, combined with over three decades of violent political upheaval and dictatorship, has led thousands to flee their homeland.

"After the fall of the Aristide government in 1991, entire families were assassinated. We went into hiding, into the mountains. Later I reunited with other supporters of the deposed government and we tried to strategize about what to do. Armed men entered the meeting and began burning people alive, killing everyone. I was pregnant with my first baby at the time. I escaped and was able to get over the border." – Agathe

"My father was a political activist who helped to organize for Aristide's party. After Aristide's

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KEY STATISTICS

- ✓ Article 11 of the Dominican Constitution guarantees citizenship to "all persons born in the territory of the Dominican Republic". Yet Dominican-born children of Haitians, even asylum seekers, are denied Dominican citizenship. Recently, Dominican officials have moved to change their Constitution and to retroactively deny citizenship rights to Dominicans of Haitian descent.
- ✓ More than 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent have no documents and have been denied their birthright citizenship. A small fraction of those are children of asylum seekers forced into the Dominican Republic to escape political persecution in Haiti.
- ✓ Nearly 1,500 Haitians are now seeking asylum status in the Dominican Republic. Some have awaited a response for over 15 years.

A Note from the National Director

Dear Friends of JRS/USA:

This issue of the Refugee Voice explores the Haitian refugee crisis in the Dominican Republic, with special attention to Haitian women.

Most Haitians in the Dominican Republic live in extreme poverty without access to education, potable water, health services, housing or electricity. Among the larger Haitian migrant population are refugees and asylum seekers who have been forcibly displaced from their homeland and now live in an inhospitable land under a government that refuses to acknowledge them. Perhaps most disturbing is the discrimination targeting asylum seekers' children, many of whom were born on Dominican soil yet whose Dominican citizenship goes unrecognized.

Since 1995 JRS has worked to raise awareness about the systematic exclusion of Haitian asylum seekers and their Dominican children and to provide funding for health care for this vulnerable population. We thank the JRS office in the Dominican Republic for their partnership in producing this newsletter.

The Haitian refugee women interviewed have lived in limbo for the last fifteen years, waiting for the Dominican government and the international community to offer an end to their pain.

Fr. Ken Gavin, S.J.



Vulnerable populations, like elderly Haitian refugees in the Dominican Republic, need special assistance to survive.

"After they killed my husband in Haiti, I had to come here for refuge. Without identity documents I cannot get a job that pays. Mostly I work for food. I have no money." — Helene



To make ends meet in the Dominican Republic, even professional Haitians are forced into menial labor, such as cleaning houses and washing clothes.



Without legal protection, day laborers have no recourse if employers refuse to pay owed wages.

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government fell, the Tontons Macoutes killed my father. They threatened our entire family and finally I fled the country and came to the Dominican Republic." — Marie

NO ASSISTANCE

The Dominican government has been unresponsive to the protection needs of these refugees, issuing a mere handful of asylum decisions in the last decade. It has even arbitrarily stripped some Haitian refugees of their refugee status.

"I have not received any assistance from the Dominican government, but neither have I expected

anything — not after the treatment we received while trying to get legal documentation, not when discrimination in this country is so intense and their hatred of us runs so deep." — Coralie

"I arrived in the DR in 1992. We have had no opportunity to build a life here. We live in the same desperation, degradation and misery as we did when we arrived. I have never received help from the Dominican government, only from the United Nations' office for refugees." — Helene

Haitians seeking refuge in the Dominican Republic have little hope for a peaceful existence in the face of intense discrimination, legal exclusion and a lack of social services.

"I have no possibility of earning any real income here. I can sometimes make fried foods to sell.

Every morning I try to get enough food together to go to the corner to sell treats to the neighbors. I do this so that my son and I may eat. He's very sick and I have to help him. With the money from the sales we do not do well, but at least we are surviving." — Marie

"Mostly I depend on my daughter. She sells

vegetables and I help her to wash what she sells. With her sales we live. I am advanced in age and I am sick. I cannot look for work. I do not have any legal documentation, which is indispensable in this country. Here I am doing very poorly." — Coralie

NO DOCUMENTS

The Dominican government rarely provides documents to indicate that a Haitian asylum seeker has claimed a right to international protection, and it charges exorbitant fees to initiate and renew an asylum status determination process.

"We have been here most of my life, 15 years now. Without documents you cannot get anything in this country. You have no access to education, or medical care, no services — nothing. It all comes from the lack of documents. And we came over as refugees. They do not distinguish." — Rosemarie

"Sometimes I am able to get a job in domestic service, but it always ends if they ask me for legal documentation. When I need to go to the hospital I have to go with a Dominican to get treatment.

They will not treat a Haitian." — Fleur

"After they killed my husband in Haiti, I had to come here for refuge. Living here has been a trial. Without identity documents I cannot get a job that pays. Mostly I work for food. I have no money. The domestic service I do for families does not get me enough money to have a life here." — Helene

When documents are issued, they are sometimes useless, as Dominican immigration officials have been known to ignore or confiscate the issued documents and illegally deport Haitian refugees in mass expulsion campaigns. Haitian refugees and their Dominican-born children live in fear of deportation.

Recently the JRS office in the Dominican Republic documented a case illustrating the Dominican government's disregard for the vulnerability of asylum seekers: Immigration police arrested the minor daughter

ter of an asylum seeker and deported the girl to a Haitian border town. Her frantic mother had no way to help her to return. Dominican authorities did not listen to the child's pleas when they were deporting her and failed to ascertain whether any among the large group expelled had a claim for refugee status.

DISCRIMINATION

Complaints of discrimination and daily humiliation were universal among the Haitian women interviewed. Rooted in the island's history of internal rivalry between nations, rebellions and brutal military dictatorships, racism and xenophobia against Haitians in the Dominican Republic is a structural problem reinforced by the denial of educational, social and legal rights for people of Haitian ancestry.

"My father was assaulted once on the street here: beaten for being Haitian. One time a man hit him with his car and called him names, all for being Haitian. These indignities he suffered after fleeing for his life from our homeland." – Lissette

"I am here because I had to come here. But I do not want to stay. I do not want to die here. Here they treat us like a disease. I have been the victim of violence and discrimination many times here in the Dominican Republic. I was fired from a job I had, and they told me they didn't want a Haitian working for them." – Agathe

"Here no Haitian feels free. I would like to be in my own country, I would like to be in a place where I would be treated like a person who merits respect. Here they treat a Haitian with less respect than one would give to an animal." – Rosemarie

STATELESSNESS

Although the Dominican constitution

guarantees citizenship to all persons born within the country's border, Haitian mothers are consistently denied official birth certificates for their newborn children in Dominican hospitals. This is true even for those seeking asylum or formerly holding refugee status within the Dominican Republic. A ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2005 brought the plight of Haitians' Dominican-born children to the fore. The Court's ruling found the Dominican government to be in violation of its own constitution because of its practice of systematically denying birth certificates to Dominicans of Haitian ancestry.

The government's policy has created a class of stateless individuals: meaning, no state offers protection, security and citizenship to the Dominican-born children of Haitian refugees. These children are routinely denied the rights due citizens in

"My babies live here in misery and without anything, all because their mother is Haitian. They do not even have a bed to sleep in. And they were born here! They are Dominican by law, but not by document." – Lissette

the areas of education, employment opportunities, health care and voting, and are vulnerable to exploitation and state-sanctioned discrimination. Some Dominicans of Haitian descent have suffered the greater indignity of being targeted for arrest, stripped of any proof of Dominican identity and have been expelled to Haiti by Dominican immigration police.

"I left Haiti as a refugee, and now my five children live their lives in misery. This hurts a mother. The children want more, but they are held back by the reality of their circumstances as children of Haitians living in a country that hates the sight of them." – Sandrine

"My babies live here in misery and without any-
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Photo courtesy of JRS-Dominican Republic

Haitian homes ransacked by local Dominicans. Attacks against Haitian communities are frequent as authorities are lax to respond.



A Haitian girl being lowered off a Dominican army truck during a mass expulsion.



Under Dominican law, all children born in Dominican territory have the right to Dominican citizenship. However, the children of Haitian asylum seekers are denied all citizenship rights.



After 15 years of denial of protection within the Dominican Republic, the Haitian women featured hope for better lives for their children.

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thing, all because their mother is Haitian. They do not even have a bed to sleep in. They are malnourished. And they were born here! They are Dominican by law, but not by document.” – Lissette

A CALL TO ACTION

Jesuit Refugee Service/USA is advocating for the following policy changes:

1. The Dominican Republic should build an effective asylum system and issue permanent documents to asylum seekers with the full support of the United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR).

2. The Dominican government should abide by the Dominican constitution, which guarantees full citizenship rights to any person born within the Dominican Republic, and end the practice of denying citizenship to the

Dominican-born children of Haitian asylum seekers.

3. The Dominican Republic should end the practice of massive expulsions of Haitian people and make an effort to investigate all potential deportees for asylum or refugee eligibility or for right to Dominican citizenship.
4. The UNHCR should reestablish offices in the Dominican Republic and Haiti to work on behalf of refugees and stateless persons and provide daily guidance to the Dominican state on how to carry-out effective and humane policies to protect refugees and stateless persons.
5. The United States should recognize the vulnerability of Haitian refugees and explore permanent solutions for this population, particularly for the Haitian refugee women who have been seeking asylum status in the Dominican Republic for over a decade.



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