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Dominican Republic restarts Haitian deportations

by Ezra Fieser by Catholic News Service

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic -- Dominican authorities have rounded up and deported thousands of Haitians this year, ending a moratorium put in place after last year's earthquake and fanning long-standing friction between the countries.

In January, the Dominican government formally restarted the process of deporting undocumented Haitians, after halting the process following the magnitude-7 earthquake that toppled Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince.

As of mid-March, the Dominican military had deported nearly 7,000 Haitians, authorities said. A representative from the office of the director-general of migration said authorities would continue sending back Haitians who are in the country illegally.

Catholic organizations said Dominican authorities are sweeping up people irrespective of their legal standing and violating a 1999 migration protocol signed between countries.

"What we're seeing is a process of mass deportations that doesn't follow the legal process," said Digna Maria Adames Nunez, director of the Jesuit Refugee Service office in Santo Domingo, which works with Haitian immigrants.

Adames said military agents began rounding up suspected undocumented immigrants in December, a month before it announced the deportations would start. She said authorities drive buses through areas where Haitians are known to congregate and indiscriminately detain people.

Authorities have said suspected undocumented immigrants are processed at a migration center and that all legal procedures are followed.

The 1999 protocol established various measures to protect migrants, including provisions that deportations would not be carried out overnight and that families would not be separated.

"The process (the military) is using violates their (Haitians') rights," said Jeuris Valerio, who monitors migration and human rights for Solidaridad Fronteriza, a Jesuit organization that works with migrants at the Haitian-Dominican border in the town of Dajabon.

"There are children being separated from their parents and vice versa," Valerio said. "There are several violations of the protocol."

Edwin Paraison, Haiti's minister of Haitians living abroad, told reporters recently that "some people are being arrested in the street without having their immigration status checked." He said the Haitian government "recognizes that the majority are illegal, but there are also people who have been living in the Dominican Republic for a long time."

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Paraison said the controversy over the deportations underscored the need for the countries to reform the migration process.

Dominican officials have dismissed claims of human rights abuses. Newly appointed Director-General of Migration Jose Ricardo Taveras said his office would follow the constitution and take into account the "delicate Haitian situation."

The situation took on a dangerous twist when residents in communities around the city of Santiago, the Dominican Republic's second-largest city, began forcing out Haitians. A neighborhood organization representing the communities said it would temporarily stop the practice after Dominican authorities warned it would crack down on any vigilantism.

The government estimates that 1 million Haitians live in the Dominican Republic, although it is difficult to accurately count the population because most Haitians are in the country illegally.

Dominican authorities deported an average of 20,417 Haitians each year from 2003 to 2008, according to a report by Jesuit-run Central American University's Jose Simeon Canas Institute for Human Rights in El Salvador.

The deportations do little to deter migration along the porous 130-mile-long border that separates the countries.

"People are deported and just return as soon as they can. It's like the situation in the United States, except it's twice as bad because we're on a small island," Valerio said.

Jean-Rene, a Haitian immigrant who asked his last name be withheld because he was in the country illegally, said he had been deported twice.

"The situation in Haiti is very hard. There are no jobs," he said from a stall where he worked selling clothing in a hardscrabble area under a highway overpass in Santo Domingo. "It's easy to come back. I've never had a problem crossing the border."

Despite sharing the same island, the Dominican Republic and Haiti are marked by dramatically different economic realities: Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas. The Dominican Republic is the most visited tourism destination in the Caribbean.

That economic disparity has long fueled migration. Many Haitians came originally to cut cane in sugar fields and, more recently, to work in construction jobs at the hotels and resorts on popular tourism-rich beaches. Their presence has long been a source of contention -- leading to claims of racism and xenophobia.

The earthquake shook loose historical tensions, if only briefly, as Dominican rescue workers were among the first to reach Haiti to help. The country also opened its airports and customs to serve as a turnstile for humanitarian aid to reach Haiti.

Its role in the relief effort won praise from Santo Domingo Cardinal Nicolas Lopez Rodriguez, who lauded "the solidarity and speed with which the Dominican government moved to help the people of Haiti when it experienced the earthquake."

Dominican officials, including President Leonel Fernandez, have remained key players in the long-term reconstruction planning for Haiti.

But the restart of deportations has eroded the little progress authorities had made on solving the migration issue, Adames said.

"There was a period where we were coming together (with the government) and working on it, but that's stopped," she said. "Now, I don't have any expectations that it will be resolved."

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