

Deporting Haitians would be 'morally inappropriate', say bishops

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Feb. 9, 2011



A policeman argues with men during a march and protest against the Haitian government in Port-au-Prince Feb. 7. (CNS photo/Eduardo Munoz, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- A year after the Department of Homeland Security stopped deportations to Haiti for humanitarian reasons, the agency is being urged back off its recent resumption of deportations on the grounds that civil unrest, cholera and slow earthquake recovery make Haiti too dangerous.

"Now is not the time to resume deportations to Haiti, nor would it be morally or politically appropriate to do so in the foreseeable future," wrote representatives of two U.S. Catholic organizations to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

In a separate action, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a part of the Organization of American States, warned that the deportees, most of whom are removed from the United States because of their criminal records, would be sent to detention centers in Haiti that are overcrowded and where "the lack of drinking water and adequate sanitation or toilets could facilitate the transmission of cholera, tuberculosis, and other diseases."

The bishops' letter noted that one of the first 27 deportees sent from the United States Jan. 20 is reported to have already died from cholera contracted upon his return.

Homeland Security has announced its intention to deport 700 Haitians by the end of the year, said Coadjutor Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles, chairman of the migration committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., chairman of Catholic Relief Services.



"Yet a cholera outbreak has killed over 3,600 Haitians and infected more than 400,000. Reconstruction continues at a slow pace, with hundreds of thousands still living in tent cities," they said in their letter. "And the ongoing dispute over the Nov. 28 presidential elections has exacted a significant toll not only on the political apparatus of the country but also on the Haitian psyche, resulting in violent protests.

"To compound these issues, Haiti's jails, in which the Haitian government routinely holds deportees and which are notorious for the inhumane treatment of detainees, are now rife with cholera," they added.

They said one deportee, Wildrick Guerrier, "reportedly has died of cholera contracted in a Haitian jail and another deportee is seriously ill. To continue deportations in the face of such conditions would represent a knowing disregard for the life and dignity of the Haitians scheduled for deportation."

The letter took the Department of Homeland Security to task for its depiction of those on the deportation list as having "serious criminal records."

"Of the 27 already deported and another 300 who await deportation, there are a significant number with low-level, nonviolent criminal convictions who had already been released and had been living in the community without incident for years," wrote the bishops. "Others have compelling humanitarian situations, including serious medical conditions, or potential claims for immigration relief."

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Continuing deportations "would signal to a nation struggling to recover from natural disaster that the United States is retreating from its commitment to help Haiti return to health," they said. "From our experience providing life-saving humanitarian services to the people of Haiti through numerous CRS programs in country, Haiti is not equipped at this time to receive deportees, especially those who may have serious criminal backgrounds."

Instead, Archbishop Gomez and Bishop Kicanas recommended immigration relief for Haitians in the United States, including:

- Continuing the designation of temporary protected status for Haitians who entered the United States after the earthquake last January so that they have access to benefits.
- The extension of the immigration status known as humanitarian parole for immediate family members of Haitians who were evacuated for medical treatment.

- The implementation of a family reunification program that would expedite the legal admission of 55,000 Haitians who have been approved to come to the United States but are awaiting their admission dates.

"We believe that these measures would alleviate an otherwise inevitable worsening of the social and economic strains on the stricken nation, facilitate the reunification of Haitian families, and ensure that sorely-needed remittances flow to the country," the bishops said. "The adoption of these measures would also send an important signal to the Haitian people that the United States remains committed to their long-term welfare."

The intervention in the issue by the Inter-American Commission was a rare step, and followed requests to the OAS by representatives of hundreds of humanitarian, religious, civil rights and public policy organizations.

"Far from improving, conditions in Haiti are equally bad, if not worse, than one year ago," said the Jan. 10 letter.

It asked for the commission to support "precautionary measures" including "halting roundups, detention, and imminent deportations of Haitian nationals by the U.S. government" that were laid out in an earlier letter from legal and rights groups. Those groups included the University of Miami School of Law Human Rights and Immigration Clinics, the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, the Center for Constitutional Rights, Alternative Chance, and the Law Clinic and Center for Social Justice at Loyola University New Orleans.

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