

7.4 Haitian Migrant Labour and Trafficking in the Dominican Republic

The isle of Hispaniola contains a large share of the Caribbean region's total population. Migration-related developments there threaten the stability of the entire region.

Each year, Haitian *braceros* (strong armed ones) migrate to the Dominican Republic, both legally and illegally, for harvest-related employment in the profitable sugarcane industry. These migrants are predominantly men, but some families have followed, leading to settlement. Despite high rates of unemployment in the Dominican Republic, practically all the sugar crop is harvested by Haitians. Many Dominicans reject such employment due to the horrific working conditions and pay of the *braceros*. In 1979, the London-based Anti-Slavery Society described the Haitian sugar cane workers' plight as slavery (Péan, 1982: 10). In 1937, some 15 000 Haitians were massacred in the Dominican Republic, and anti-Haitian xenophobia persists even today. Despite such violence, the Dominican government continued to make an annual payment to the Haitian government for the provision of *braceros*. The annual payments lasted until 1986, when the Haitian government received a payment of US\$2 million for the provision of 19 000 *braceros*.

Subsequently, sugar interests in the Dominican Republic relied increasingly on recruiters to find the estimated 40 000 workers needed for the harvest. In 1991, following democratic elections in Haiti and growing international criticism of the plight of Haitian workers, the Dominican government ordered a mass expulsion of Haitians. Many of the more than 10 000 individuals expelled were persons of Haitian descent who had long resided in the Dominican Republic (French, 1991: 15). This mass expulsion helped destabilize the fragile Haitian democracy. The overthrow of President Aristide in September 1991 led to a renewed outflow of Haitian emigrants to the USA, of whom, most were intercepted by the US Coast Guard and detained at the US naval installation at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba before being repatriated.

In 1994, US military intervention in Haiti restored Aristide to power but the socio-economic and political crisis worsened. Haitian employment in the sugarcane industry declined to 20 000 persons, though the numbers of Haitian construction workers in the Dominican Republic increased. In 1996, IOM-initiated negotiations between the two states, aimed at facilitating bilateral cooperation on deportations, began the

registration of Haitians, and a possible legalization programme. However, violence against Haitians persisted (Alexandre, 2001: 51-53), as did large-scale deportations. Between August 2000 and January 2001, the Dominican National Guard reported a total of 45 000 deportations (Segura, 2002: 5).

An upsurge in violence in 2004 left the international community fearing an outpour of Haitian refugees. Such an outflow never came to fruition, though it is widely believed that many Haitians harboured a desire to leave. The immigration policies of most destination countries became increasingly restrictive with regards to Haitian migrants for security purposes. Such policies generally involved the summary return or detention of Haitian migrants until repatriation or resettlement. In 2005, it was believed that 1 million Haitians resided in the Dominican Republic (IOM, 2005: 93-4). Furthermore, it was estimated that 80 per cent of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic were undocumented, including children born of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic (Michaux and Lisane, 2001).

Human rights groups have focused their attention on trafficking between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in recent years. Haitians, many of them children (known as *restaveks* in Creole), are often trafficked as forced labour in agriculture and construction where many live in *bateyes* (shantytowns) and are exploited sexually. Although there have been efforts to end the abuse, little protection was provided to the victims of trafficking in 2007 (USDS).

In 2007, Haiti and the Dominican Republic remained worlds apart socio-economically. Despite the presence of a UN Stabilization Mission and elections in 2006, Haiti remains the least developed nation in the Western hemisphere. The continued outflow of Haitians fleeing poverty and repression across the Dominican border or over the Caribbean Sea to the USA remains likely. During the first four months of 2007, the US Coast Guard detained 909 Haitians who were trying to enter the USA.

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