

Churches Rail At U.S. Attitude Toward Haitian Immigrations

By FRANK MAUROVICH
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President Carter, who has been praised by religious leaders for his stirring efforts to promote peace in the Middle East may be stung by accusations from some Protestant and Catholic quarters that his administration is violating the human rights of Haitian refugees in this country.

Exasperated by a reported lack of response from federal agencies, the National Council of Churches (NCC) has announced it will file a complaint with the Organization of American States, charging the United States with violating the human rights of thousands of Haitian refugees.

According to the Rev. William L. Wipfler, human rights director of the NCC's Division of Overseas Ministries, the unprecedented church action against the U.S. government became necessary after repeated requests from Protestant and Catholic refugee agencies failed to halt the deportation of Haitians.

The charges of government insensitivity are not new. Last year, Bishop Rene Gracidas of Pensacola-Tallahassee, who heads the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) Committee on Migration, denounced the "official opposition, hostility and discrimination" of U.S. immigration authorities toward Haitians and called for "full refugee rights" for the some 30,000 islanders who have fled to this country from their Caribbean homeland.

Bishop Gracidas' committee issued a resolution calling for the "immediate cessation of all deportation proceedings against Haitian refugees."

The Catholic and Protestant agencies have claimed that the human rights of the refugees are being violated on two counts — both here and in Haiti.

Wipfler said Haitians are being deported without full hearings on appeals for political asylum. He also charged that they have been denied legal aid and that refugees — and church workers and lawyers who have been trying to assist them have been harassed by government officials.

John C. McCarthy, director of the United States Catholic Conference's Office of

Migration and Refugee Services, said that deported Haitians face possible imprisonment, torture and execution if turned over to the repressive government of Jean-Claude Duvalier.

The conditions in Haiti are grim, with the lowest standard of living in the Western Hemisphere. The

population of some five million lives on the barren and rocky western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, an area slightly larger than the state of Vermont. The Dominican Republic occupies the rest.

Haiti's people still rely heavily on a rural, barter economy. Sixty per cent of the labor force is unemployed. The annual per capita income in the agricultural sector is \$50, one of the lowest in the world.

Eighty per cent of the people are illiterate and only 25 per cent of the children attend school. Drought and disease regularly chalk up a deadly toll.

Worse, however, is the political repression. Last December, for example, the Rev. Luc Neree, a Baptist minister and publisher of the critical weekly Hebdo Jeune Presse was seized in Port-au-Prince and beaten unconscious by Duvalier's secret police in front of his congregation.

The attack on the

minister was apparently a government punishment for a Jeune Presse editorial criticizing the police for terrorizing the peasants.

The people live in fear, says one refugee in Miami. "If they catch you saying something against the government, they put you in jail," he said. "They take your wife, baby and friends and mess with them. Just complaining that you don't have a job, you can get taken to jail."

"If a man from Haiti says he fears living in his country, he is telling the truth," says Bel-Armi De Montreuz, a Haitian who is now living legally in Houston. "I am scared to put foot on the soil where most of my family have been slaughtered because they spoke out about the so-called democratic rule."

Little wonder that so many Haitians have tried to escape — by any means possible. The Coast Guard recently took in tow an old 30-foot motorless boat off the Florida coast with a tree trunk for a mast and canvas sacks for sails. On board were 67 men, women and children who had somehow managed to navigate the 600 miles from Haiti.

But the U.S. has not been a land of freedom for them either. The problem is that people who flee from such countries as Haiti do not qualify as "political refugees," defined in the present Immigration and

Naturalization Act as a person who has escaped from a "Communist or Communist-dominated country."

"The facts are being ignored," says Father Jean Yves Urfie of the Haitian Catholic Center in Brooklyn. The French Holy Ghost Father who was expelled from Haiti with other members of his order in 1969 says, "The State Department admits that Papa Doc (who ruled Haiti from 1959 to 1971) was bad, but insists that his son is an improvement. But even official government inquiries have shown that the Duvalier government is corrupt, that political prisoners are tortured and disappear, and that money and food sent to the poor in Haiti never get there."

Bettye Wiggs, who worked with the NCC's Division of Church and Society on behalf of the Haitian Refugees, believes the main reason the U.S. government is unwilling to accept the Haitians is "because they are black and poor."

"The State Department has admitted 600,000 Cubans and 200,000 Vietnamese without asking their political status or requiring them to go to hearings," says Sue Sullivan, former director of the NCC's Haitian Refugee Concerns program. "We want the same treatment for the

Haitians." In an editorial entitled "Haitian refugees, a new challenge," the Florida Catholic, weekly newspaper of the Diocese of St. Petersburg and Orlando, said, "All people of good will must meet this challenge to help the needy. Every citizen of the U.S., with the exception of the American Indian

(himself a victim of oppression), is now a citizen because someone in past generations came to America to seek freedom and opportunity.

"We owe a debt of gratitude to our heritage that can be paid only by extending the blessing of liberty to those who are denied it elsewhere," the editorial said.

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