

# Church leaders urge Bush to change policy

By Laurie Hansen  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Church leaders of various denominations are urging the Bush administration to reverse its policy of sending home Haitian boat people intercepted at sea.

At a Nov. 25 Washington news conference, Catholic, Jewish and Evangelical Lutheran church leaders said it was critical that the United States grant temporary protected status to Haitians as long as turmoil continues in Haiti.

The U.S. State Department announced Nov. 18 that it would begin that day sending Haitian boat people back to their country to head off the threat of a mass exodus. Those facing deportation had been held aboard U.S. ships or on the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba, for the past few weeks.

A day later a federal judge in Miami issued a temporary restraining order halting the "repatriation of Haitians who are aboard U.S. flagged ships." The ban was extended until Dec. 2, to give human-rights advocates time to travel to the Coast Guard vessels in the Caribbean where the refugees are being held to take depositions.

Meanwhile, a sailboat carrying 200 Haitians sank in heavy seas off the coast of Cuba Nov. 21, with 16 confirmed drowned and another 119 missing and believed dead.

In a Nov. 20 letter to President George Bush, Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said those who risk the dangerous passage from Haiti "are coming to escape violence and oppression that has, once again, become intolerable."

Government action to forceably repatriate refugees "is not an acceptable solution to a complex problem," asserted a separate statement by Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration. Cardinal Law attributed the refugees' flight from Haiti to denial of human rights and a desperation "borne of economic stagnation and political instability."

Since a Sept. 30 military coup ousted Haiti's president, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the number of Haitians at-

tempting the 600-mile journey from Haiti to Florida has swelled.

Since the coup, 4,530 Haitians have been picked up by the Coast Guard. Of that number, 122 have been deemed eligible to apply for political asylum and brought to Miami.

At the news conference, Jesuit Father Richard Ryscavage, executive director of the U.S. bishops' division of Migration and Refugee Services, said the Haitian boat people should either be brought into the United States "as full refugees" or as "parolees with immediate work authorization" allowed to apply for political asylum. Those who do not qualify, he said, should be granted temporary protected status until conditions in Haiti improve.

Noting that the Catholic refugee-resettlement network alone has resettled 30,000 people this year, Father Ryscavage said resettling the Haitian boat people would not be a problem.

He said Migration and Refugee Services has in place a system by which it could resettle Haitians outside the Miami-Dade County area "to relieve some of the stress there."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters Nov. 19 that Washington would continue to show compassion for Haitians who face possible persecution.

But, he said, "we've seen no history of any persecution of boat people returned to Haiti." He said the United States can no longer be a global haven for all refugees.

Emma D. Navajas, associate director of immigration for Migration and Refugee Services, told Catholic News Service Nov. 25 that after two days' of interviews in late November with Haitian boat people who had made it to Miami, she was convinced that political persecution exists in Haiti.

The Haitians she interviewed were among those intercepted by the Coast Guard and found eligible to apply for political asylum in the United States.

Navajas said all the refugees she interviewed had worked for Father Aristide. They were targeted, she said, for things "as simple as taking people to vote, or recruiting people" for Aristide's political party. She said the Haitians claimed the army had burned,



AP/Wide World Photos

Haitian refugees wait to be processed by the Red Cross in a makeshift center at the welcoming area of the industrial docks in Port-Au-Prince on Nov. 19.

beaten and shot supporters of Aristide.

Father Thomas Wenski, director of the Pierre Toussaint Haitian Catholic Center in Miami, charged that the U.S. government falsely assumes that "because the Haitian boat people are poor they are economic refugees, not political refugees."

"People have been poor in Haiti for generations," he said, "but haven't decided to leave" until now.

Unlike Cuban boat people, who routinely receive political asylum, most

Haitian boat people are treated as economic refugees by the United States. When the Coast Guard intercepts them at sea, it ships them back to the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince.

Responding to complaints that U.S. policy toward Haitians contrasts sharply with the welcome given fleeing Cubans, Robert Gelbard, a top State Department official, said that Cuba, unlike Haiti, hands out stiff jail terms for people who try to leave the island without authorization.

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