

Refugees harassed, hospice sister claims

By Thomas A. Russell
Catholic News Service

LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Despite the assurances of U.S. State Department officials, repatriated Haitian boat people are being harassed, according to a U.S. sister back home from the island nation for a rest.

"It's ridiculous for our State Department to say there is no reason to believe these people are being harassed," said Sister Ann Weller, SSJ, who works in a hospice in Port-Au-Prince.

The harassment occurs not when the refugees get off the ship but when "people go back into the countryside," she said. "It's then that the damage is done. I think it's terrifically hazardous to go back."

Sister Weller works at Hospice St. Joseph, an outreach of the Diocese of Lafayette in the Haitian capital, which she termed "an oppressed city."

"The hardest hit now are the rural areas that depend upon Port-au-Prince for their vegetables and medical supplies and being able to get transporta-

tion into the hospital if necessary," she said.

"The level of intimidation is just beyond anything you can imagine," she told *Sunday Visitor*, Lafayette's diocesan newspaper.

"Families are telling their children to speak to no one. Of course, the reason for this is the nightly cruising of the military through the neighborhoods, firing automatic weapons into the air, sometimes just taking a potshot wherever, and it'll bounce off a metal gate and hit somebody."

According to Sister Weller, 200 people were killed at random in the Port-au-Prince slum of Cite Soleil following the Sept. 30 coup that ousted Haiti's president, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide. They died "for no other reason than they were Aristide's people," she said.

In a March 9 statement, Bishop Walter F. Sullivan of Richmond, Va., president of Pax Christi U.S.A., the U.S. branch of the international Catholic peace movement, said "our treatment of the Haitian refugees is sinful,



AP/Wide World Photos
Makendi Laguerre sits beside Avriel Pierre (left), who is eating cornmeal March 13 at the Central Orphanage in Carrefour, a town on the edge of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Since the September coup that ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the trade embargo sponsored by the Organization of American States has restricted supplies to the island nation.

a grave injustice."

"All of our families were refugees at one time or another," Bishop Sullivan stated. "The Statue of Liberty declares: 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' The Haitian refugees are tired, poor and persecuted, but today, we send them back."

Harry Hosey, founder of Adopt a

Parish, which links U.S. parishes with Haitian parishes, said he thought the forced repatriation was racially motivated.

Hosey also blamed the United States for aggravating Haiti's social conditions with a 1982 law removing import taxes on Haitian goods. The law led U.S. companies to set up shop in Haiti and pay exploitative wages, he said.

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