

# Prelate to Bush: Don't turn back on Haitians

By Laurie Hansen  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — To the chagrin of the Bush administration, the flow of Florida-bound Haitian boat people that U.S. officials tried to slow to a trickle once again became a flood.

To the chagrin of Haitians who risked their lives on rickety rafts and later were among the lucky ones "screened in" by U.S. immigration officials convinced of their stories of persecution at the hands of Haiti's military forces, life in the United States is a bureaucratic tangle that often leaves them without the chance to seek employment and in immigration limbo.

To the chagrin of U.S. church personnel and human-rights advocates working on behalf of the Haitian boat people, President Bush in late May ordered the U.S. Coast Guard to begin returning Haitian boat people to their country without first determining if they were victims of political persecution.

The action has spurred charges that the United States is violating international law by forcibly returning people to a nation where they may face political persecution.

The Bush administration says Haitians who wish to enter the United States as political refugees may apply at the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a move human-rights activists call extremely risky in a nation where opponents of military rule are frequently persecuted.

In a May 22 letter to Bush, Boston's Cardinal Bernard F. Law, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Migration Committee, compared turning away Haitian boat people to refusing entry to Jews at the time of the Holocaust.

"The sad memory of Jews being refused entry before World War II should teach us that never again should we turn our back on a human being pleading for our help and hospitality," wrote Cardinal Law.

From just about everyone's perspective, the future of Haiti's people — whether they have made it here, are still at home, or are somewhere in be-

tween — appears bleak.

U.S. officials said May 20 that the U.S. Coast Guard had picked up a record 10,104 Haitian boat people so far this month.

Coast Guard officials reported that their ships were full of Haitian refugees and the temporary processing center at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba was about to pass its 12,500-person capacity.

Since October, 34,560 Haitians have been lodged at Guantanamo for temporary periods.

According to the State Department, 6,691 Haitian boat people had been brought to the United States after immigration screening determined that they were likely to qualify as political refugees because they face persecution if they return home.

U.S. policy on Haiti is "one big mess," said Sister Catherine Cassidy, a Sister of the Humility of Mary who is immigration attorney at Florida Rural Legal Services in Fort Pierce, Fla.

The bottom line, she said, is that the United States needs to "make every effort to reinstate (Haiti's president, Father Jean-Bertrand) Aristide. When he was in, Haitians didn't leave in boats," noted Sister Cassidy.

Even that might not solve everything, said Father Thomas Wenski, director of the Pierre Toussaint Haitian Catholic Center in Miami.

He, too, believes that "the solution has to lie in Haiti. There has to be restoration of some legitimacy to government. It's hard to see that happen without a return of the elected president."

But he noted that a military regime has been in power in Haiti since October, when the Haitian armed forces overthrew Father Aristide. He can't imagine Father Aristide's return to the presidency occurring without violence.

In addition, he said, if Father Aristide were back in power, expectations would be very high. "And Haiti is too far gone for anyone to do miracles quickly," said Father Wenski.

Meanwhile, intercepted Haitians who made it to Florida because it has been determined they had plausible asylum claims, face additional problems once here.

Fran Kline, senior special assistant in refugee operations for the U.S. Catholic



AP/Wide World Photos  
Women of Cite Soleil, a poor suburb of Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, jostle Oct. 12 while trying to get kerosene for cooking food. Since the chaos of the Sept. 30 coup, some 34,560 Haitians have been lodged at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba seeking political asylum.

Conference's division of Migration and Refugee Services, said policy at Guantanamo had been to ask Haitians if they have relatives in the United States and, if so, where they live. Later work authorization was granted only in the state where the relatives resided.

The problem, according to Kline, is that often the relatives have moved since the last contact. As a result Haitian newcomers move in with family in Florida but have permission to work only in New Jersey, where they don't know anyone.

While Immigration and Naturalization Services will change the state if notified about such a situation, it does so by replacing the plastic work authorization card with a stamped paper which many employers refuse to accept, said Kline.

Another problem, said Kline, stems from an INS policy prohibiting Haitian boat people from extending their 90-day work authorization until they have filed for political asylum.

MRS has urged INS to change its policy to one that would grant Haitians work authorization for a full year, during which time they would be required to file for political asylum.

Kline said that the current 90-day rule for asylum application coupled with backlogs in the asylum application process has meant Haitians lose legal status and, as a result, no longer qualify for any social service backup, such as state-funded employment services or English classes.

When Haitians lack legal status, they are subject to being returned home, she said. While deportation is unlikely because INS has neither the ability to locate so many people nor the resources to return them, the loss of status "leaves them in limbo" facing an uncertain future, said Kline.

She said the USCC's attorneys, who have filed asylum claims on behalf of 700 Haitian boat people thus far, have been unable to keep up with the demand for legal assistance. More than 3,200 Haitian boat people have been resettled by Migration and Refugee Services working in cooperation with dioceses since last November.

## Bishop Clark to celebrate ordination Mass Saturday

ROCHESTER — Bishop Matthew H. Clark will ordain 13 deacons this Saturday, May 30, at Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park. The Mass is scheduled to begin at 10:30 a.m.

In addition to ordaining six transitional deacons in preparation for ordination to the priesthood, the bishop will ordain seven men as permanent deacons to serve in the diocese.

Three of the transitional deacons are being ordained for eventual service as diocesan priests. The other three transitional deacons are being ordained as members of the Congregation of St. Basil — the Basilian Fathers.

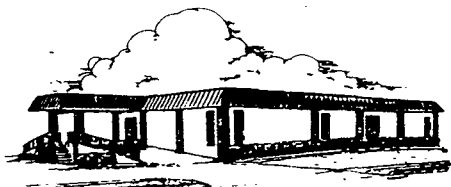
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