

Catholic agency is lone processor of refugees

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The Catholic Church's refugee resettlement program now is the only agency processing Haitian asylum seekers after the Immigration and Naturalization Service began requiring applicants to check in regularly or risk being returned to detention while their cases are pending.

The Clinton administration agreed in early May to permit about 400 Haitians who arrived in south Florida April 22 to remain in the United States and apply for political asylum.

Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Catholic Conference is the only nongovernmental agency helping to resettle those Haitians.

The other church resettlement agency, the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program of the National Council of Churches, announced May 9 it was withdrawing from the Haitian program. The decision was made to protest the requirement by the Department of Justice, which oversees INS, that asylum applicants check in with resettlement agencies biweekly at first and then monthly.

While the council's organization likened the requirement to asking resettlement agencies to enforce laws for the INS, administrators of the Catholic refugee service said accepting the requirement was preferable to leaving the Haitians in detention while their cases are pending, usually a process that takes several years.

"There should be no posturing when the well-being of human beings is at stake," said John Swenson, associate executive director of MRS.

He said MRS will not be participating in any enforcement activities, "nor have we been asked to."

Raul Hernandez, assistant director of special programs for MRS in Miami, said INS is requiring asylum applicants to phone in once every two weeks at first and, after three months, to phone in once a month. MRS will be expected to keep a list of which applicants fail to check in as required, but no MRS follow-up is asked.

According to the INS, applicants who fail to report could have their permits to work revoked and may be put back in detention.

The 411 Haitians, who were brought to shore in April after sailing to within a few miles of the U.S. coast, and another 97 who reached Key Largo in early May have been held at the immigration service's Krome Detention Center near Miami.

As long as they meet the check-in requirement, they will be free to move around the country and find work while their asylum cases are pending.

The federal government made a similar reporting requirement of Haitian asylum applicants in 1982 and people familiar with the process said the information was never used by the INS. The revival of reporting requirements was seen as a reflection of political pressure on the administration.

Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles, along with the governors of Arizona and California, sued the federal government in recent weeks in an attempt to be reimbursed for money spent on caring for refugees and immigrants.

For the last two years, the Coast Guard has been under orders to patrol international waters outside Haiti and turn back any boats carrying Haitians trying to escape from their homeland. Under a change announced May 8, the INS now will prescreen Haitians stopped at sea for eligibility to apply for asylum.



Haitian refugees returned by the U.S. Coast Guard leave a Red Cross bus in Port-au-Prince May 13. A Coast Guard cutter turned back 277 boat people to Haitian authorities in the first repatriation since President Bill Clinton altered U.S. refugee policy.

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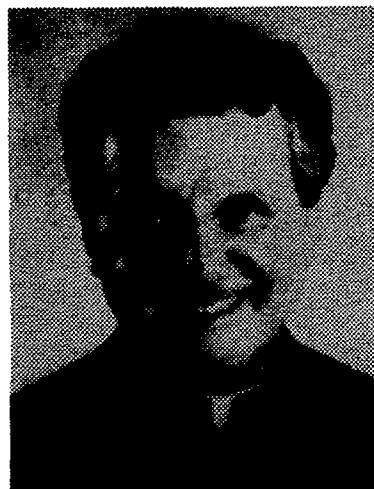
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