

# Caribbean

James Ferguson

The main issue involving minority rights in the Caribbean is that of the migrant Haitian diaspora. Haitians fleeing both political violence and economic hardship are present in many territories across the region, and are often subject to persecution and discrimination. The Haitian diaspora in some cases dates back to the 1920s but in other instances is of more recent origin. In the neighbouring Dominican Republic, for instance, there have been substantial and settled Haitian communities since the beginning of the 20th century when large-scale sugar cultivation necessitated cheap imported labour. In other Caribbean territories, especially where tourism and construction provide informal-sector job opportunities, Haitian migration has expanded significantly in the last decade. Haitian minorities in the Caribbean therefore present a mix of settled and transitory communities. While many Haitians aspire to escape Haiti and reach the United States or Canada, significant numbers also aim to work and live in the Caribbean region itself.

Since the infamous massacre of Haitian migrants by Dominican forces in 1937, relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic have been problematic. While relatively poor, with an estimated per capita GDP of US\$6,300 in 2004, the Dominican Republic is nonetheless wealthier than Haiti (US\$1,500 per capita). The shift in the economy of the Dominican Republic away from agriculture and towards tourism and export-oriented manufacturing has created strong growth since the 1980s. Haitian migrants, facing unemployment and hardship in their own country, are attracted across the border to work for lower wages than their Dominican equivalents. While some Haitian communities are based around the remnants of the traditional sugar industry, housed in the squalid settlements known as *bateyes*, increasing numbers of individuals and families are dispersed throughout the country, working in other forms of agriculture, construction, domestic work and informal trading.

It is not known how many Haitians or Dominicans of Haitian origin currently live in the Dominican Republic, but estimates range from 400,000 to 2 million. They face the contradiction of being needed as a source of low-cost and undocumented labour yet being widely discriminated against. Anti-Haitian feeling in the Dominican Republic is complex, but normally

revolves around the perceived superiority of Dominicans' alleged Hispanic culture over the African traditions ascribed to Haitians. Race, colour, language, poverty and religion all play a part in anti-Haitian sentiment. The Haitian presence in the Dominican Republic is often described as an 'invasion', while Dominican politicians and media frequently point out that the country can ill afford to provide educational and medical services to Haitian migrants.

Recent events in the Dominican Republic follow a familiar pattern of arbitrary deportation and abuse long monitored by NGOs and human rights organizations, which estimate that some 45,000 Haitians are expelled annually. In May 2005, Haitian nationals were allegedly involved in the murder of a Dominican woman in the north-western town of Hatillo Palma, near the border with Haiti. After Dominican residents threatened violent reprisals against the Haitian community, Dominican military and police forces began the deportation of over 3,500 men, women and children, forcibly removing them to the border town of Dajabón. According to the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the deportations targeted all Haitians, irrespective of whether they possessed appropriate documentation. Some Haitians were reportedly injured, their property stolen or destroyed and families separated in what the JRS called 'an indiscriminate, inhumane and illegal mass expulsion'. The Dominican authorities, according to the JRS, were in violation of international law, national migration law and an understanding of 1999 between the two states regarding expulsions.

Incidents such as this have occurred regularly from the 1980s onwards, but another legal obstacle confronts Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent in the form of nationality status. According to the Dominican Constitution, anyone born in the country is automatically considered a Dominican citizen, but a sub-clause dealing with persons 'in transit' is often applied to those of Haitian origin, even if their parents are long established and permanent residents. As a result, many thousands of people born in the Dominican Republic have no official documentation in the form of birth certificate or passport, and thus face severe difficulties in accessing education, health and other services. While the Dominican government has

granted some concessions, such as lifting the requirement for birth certificates for secondary school students in 2000, the problem remains. Neither the Dominican nor Haitian government has any interest in resolving it, as undocumented workers enjoy no legal protection or rights.

The Haitian diaspora spreads beyond the Dominican Republic, with many thousands of refugees arriving by boat each year in the Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica and other Caribbean countries. In June 2005, the Jamaican authorities repatriated 309 Haitians whose requests for political asylum were rejected. Over 2,000 had been repatriated in 2004. Also in June 2005, Antigua and Barbuda repatriated 37 Haitian migrants. In the Bahamas, where many Haitians land en route to the US, some 2,000 migrants were deported in 2004, many within days of arriving. According to Amnesty International, abuses took place in the Carmichael Detention Centre in 2004, while many repatriations were conducted in violation of international law.

While many Haitians are repatriated annually, there is also a fixed minority population in the Bahamas. The number of Haitians living there is unknown, but estimates suggest that as many as 25 per cent of the population comprises 'illegal' migrants, many of whom bypass border controls. According to the conservative Freedom House, 'between 30,000 and 40,000 Haitians reside illegally in the Bahamas', while the Nassau Institute put the figure at 78,000 in 2005. With its relatively high standard of living, the Bahamas attracts migrant workers to menial and informal-sector employment, especially domestic work and undocumented manual labour. It is extremely difficult for the Haitian minority to regularize its status regarding residency and work permits, and this reinforces not only the undocumented nature of employment but also anti-Haitian feeling among Bahamians, as expressed in the media and by politicians as the 'Haitian problem'. ■