

Bush tells Haitian people: Go to hell

by Valerie Rush

The United States Coast Guard began the forced return of 12,000 Haitian refugees to their starving homeland Feb. 3, after the U.S. Supreme Court reversed a standing injunction against their repatriation. As many as 15,000 Haitians—5,000 in the last week alone—had chosen a U.S. concentration camp in Guantanamo, Cuba over near certain death from disease or starvation in Haiti, as the U.S. embargo against their country was driving the population to below-subsistence conditions.

In dubbing the Haitians “economic refugees” and therefore ineligible for political asylum in the United States, the administration of President George Bush is rivaling that of Franklin Roosevelt in disgracing the United States. In 1939, the Roosevelt administration denied docking privileges to the ship *Saint Louis*, filled with desperate German-Jewish refugees, and sent them back to Hitler’s concentration camps. This time, of course, the hell in Haiti is of the Bush administration’s own making.

According to press reports, the embargo has created conditions tantamount to genocide in the Caribbean island nation, which was already the poorest in the hemisphere. The *New York Times* of Jan. 18 described Haitian farmers eating weeds and their own planting seeds for lack of other food. The Haitian countryside, notorious for serious deforestation problems, is being stripped of what few trees remain, to serve as firewood in place of embargoed fuel. Irrigation water that once kept select areas of cropland flourishing, is now being diverted to run hydroelectric turbines for electricity to light Haiti’s urban centers for a few hours a day. Easily preventable diseases like measles are now claiming the lives of children and others because there is no refrigeration for vaccines.

The irreparable damage to Haiti’s land and to the population’s living conditions will mean mass starvation and epidemics in the immediate future.

‘Operation Racist Shield’

The repatriation decision, apparently designed to take some political heat off the Bush administration, has proved as popular as President Bush’s Japanese diplomacy. House Majority Whip Rep. David E. Bonior (D-Mich.) condemned

the repatriation decision as “outrageous,” linking it to Bush’s fear of upsetting Florida in an election year, even while Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez, himself a Cuban immigrant who urges eliminating the artificial distinction between economic and political refugees, is handing out bumper stickers demanding that the Bush administration “interdict drugs, not Haitians.”

While human rights activists see Bush’s move as a possible violation of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, black politicians like Rep. Major Owens (D-N.Y.) are calling the repatriation “a racist act with deadly genocidal” consequences for the refugees. The *Miami Herald* bluntly referred to the repatriations as President Bush’s “Operation Racist Shield,” in a Feb. 2 editorial. The *Los Angeles Times* of Feb. 4 called the move “an oddly dissonant chord” and “very troubling,” and warned that it could prove highly embarrassing for Washington.

The Feb. 5 *Christian Science Monitor* devoted its front page to examining the contradictions between U.S. refugee policy toward Cubans, who are given permanent residence status within a year of touching U.S. shores, and toward the Haitians, who are being forced back to live under a government which the Bush administration itself has condemned as illegal and in violation of human rights. The *Monitor* suggested that Washington’s treatment of the Haitians has been complicated by “a dose of current presidential politics,” and quotes a State Department official who admits that the 125,000 Cubans in the 1980 Mariel boatlift were accepted because of the political and economic clout of the Cuban-American community—“clout that Haitians just don’t have.”

‘Easing’ of sanctions meaningless

Efforts to put a sugar-coating on the repatriation decision by simultaneously announcing an “easing” of U.S. sanctions against Haiti have also failed miserably. Permission from the U.S. Treasury Department for U.S. assembly plants in Haiti to resume production for re-export, a move allegedly designed to “lessen the burden on Haitian workers” who lost their jobs under the embargo, is universally viewed as a meaningless gesture, since the majority of those plants have shut down operations and left the country. Said one Haitian economist cited by the Feb. 5 *Washington Post*, “You’re not going to get anybody who pulled out to come back. Who are they going to export to? Who’s going to want to give them contracts?”

The announcement by the administration that its sanctions will be made “more effective” by honing in on individuals who financed and/or politically supported the Sept. 30 coup in Haiti and freezing their U.S. assets is equally absurd, since any such assets will have been withdrawn months ago.

With President Bush continuing to grasp at foreign policy straws that may help buoy him in this election year, the possibility of his attempting a “quickie” military deployment to deal with his worsening Haiti debacle cannot be ruled out.