

# Start Hunger Strike in Florida Prisons

## Boston Activists Plan Protest Rally for July 25th

By Bill Forry  
News Editor

(July 15, 2002)- Eight months after they were first jailed by the U.S. government, a group of Haitian refugees began a hunger strike last week to protest their poor treatment in Florida prisons. Meanwhile, Haitian leaders in Boston are preparing a large protest on Boston's City Hall Plaza, adjacent to the John F. Kennedy federal building, for Thursday, July 25th.

The Associated Press (AP) reports that about 37 Haitian men started a hunger strike last weekend to call attention to their plight. The men are drinking only water and refuse to eat until they "hear something positive from the INS," according to the AP. Over 250 Haitians, both men and women who say they fled Haiti by boat to escape political persecution, have been incarcerated in two Florida jails since they were arrested off the Florida coast in December.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) secretly changed its policy towards Haitian refugees in December, resulting in the lengthy imprisonment. The new INS policy- which applies only to Haitians- requires that the refugees be held in jail indefinitely until their requests for asylum is adjudicated. This is a significant change from the previous policy, which allowed the asylum-seekers to be released to the custody of friends, relatives or immigration advocates.

The detention policy has been denounced by members of Congress, including several Massachusetts representatives, who have called on President George W. Bush and Attorney general John Ashcroft to reverse the policy. A lawsuit filed by immigration activists was thrown out of federal court back in March.

In a statement released by the hunger strikers this week, they said they are protesting the "humiliation we are experiencing" at the Florida facilities. The 37 men have been on a hunger strike since last Saturday, according to an immigration advocate in Florida. However, a spokesman for the INS, Rodney Germaine, says the agency does not yet consider the action a hunger strike.

A committee of Haitian leaders in Boston is organizing a protest rally on Boston's City Hall Plaza for Thursday, July 25th, from 11am until 2pm to protest the detentions and to call on the Bush administration to end the practice. Eno Mondesir, chairman of Haitian-Americans United, Inc.- the group organizing the July 25th protest, says the event is intended to draw Haitian Americans and allies from across the state. Similar protests are being planned by Haitians in other American cities.

"It is important to come out," Mondesir said. "This is an arbitrary decision that denies Haitians the right to fair treatment. "There is no other group that has been treated this way," says Mondesir. "We see this as a human rights violation and we all need to stand against that."

State Rep. Marie St. Fleur, a Haitian American state representative from Boston (D-

Dorchester/Roxbury), says the rally will be an opportunity for all immigrants to stand together against "an injustice."

"We have to show solidarity, particularly in this day and age when we are celebrating our freedoms and democratic ideals," says St. Fleur. "For us to behave counter to those ideals sends a very mixed message to our allies and people around the world."

More information on the rally is available online at <http://www.hauinc.org>

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