

# Haitian detainees begin fast in Miami

Deportation fear, violence at home stir broad protest

By Tatsha Robertson and Ann M. Henson, Globe Staff And Globe Correspondent,

2/22/2004

MIAMI -- Dozens of Haitian women at an immigration detention center have begun a hunger strike, saying that deportation to their violence-scarred homeland would be tantamount to a death sentence. Concern grew among local residents, meanwhile, that the unrest in Haiti may have broad ramifications for South Florida.

According to immigration advocates, most of the 65 women detained at the Broward Transitional Center, began the strike on Thursday and have been drinking only juice since then to protest the possibility that they, like two other detainees, could be returned to Haiti.

The two were sent back after the violent challenge to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide erupted two weeks ago.

Cheryl Little, the executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center in Miami, has met with the women and has sent an assistant to get statements from them.

"Clearly, the women's fears are justified," Little said. "They know their country is on the brink of civil war. Some have already lost loved ones. They believe their deportation would be tantamount to a death sentence."

A statement issued by the hunger strikers indicated that some had relatives who have died in the violence in Haiti. "We are terrified that we'll be deported next," the women said.

"We'll be killed if we are returned so we prefer to die here. By not eating, we are trying to show them that we want an end to the deportations."

Last week, leaders from immigrant communities in Florida expressed their concerns to politicians about the plight of the current detainees in Florida.

On Thursday, Representative Kendrick Meek, a Democrat from Miami, urged the Bush administration to grant temporary protected status to Haitians already in the country. (Such a designation would halt deportation during the unrest.) His request was denied by the Department of Homeland Security.

Immigration officials said yesterday that federal officers were carefully monitoring the women, and denied that they were engaged in a hunger strike. Nina Pruneda, a spokeswoman for the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said several of the women began abstaining from meals after they had received word that relatives had been killed in the uprising in their homeland.

"We are monitoring the situation very very closely," Pruneda said. "We want to avoid any health complications with the detainees."

Still, some Floridians voiced fear of an impending exodus of Haitians, similar to the events of 12 years ago when turmoil pushed 70,000 Haitians to flee their country on boats. Most of those refugees were picked up by Coast Guards and were held at the US base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Immigration advocates have said that since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Haitians seeking refuge in the United States have felt the brunt of the Bush administration's tightened immigration controls.

"This administration more than any other has really cracked down Haitians even before there is a Haitian refugee crisis," said Wendy Young, director of external relations with The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

Young and other specialists on Haitian refugee issues said she did not expect a mass exodus anytime soon but acknowledged that could change if the insurrection in the country worsens.

"We don't see Haitians gathered on the shores, building boats and ready to go any day. A few weeks or maybe a few months from now we might see that," Young said.

"If you look back at the last Haitian refugee crisis, that was when the Aristide government was overthrown," Young said. "There was a lag time between the military coup and the time Haitians took to the seas."

Pruneda said 1,004 Haitian refugees were deported in 2003. Dennis Murphy, a spokesman for the Office of Homeland Security, said the government is prepared to handle a new Haitian influx into Florida.

"There are a number of efforts underway and taken in the last year since the Department of Homeland security stood up to coordinate with all entities -- particularly those in Florida -- in an event of mass migration that could be coming from anywhere," he said.

About 300 people gathered in downtown Miami yesterday to protest the events unfolding in Haiti. The march was organized by the Coalition of the Americas, a new group formed to advance the causes of expatriates from Cuba, Venezuela, Peru and Haiti.

"I've been here all my life by my father was a political prisoner in Cuba for 14 years," said Bettina Rodriguez Aguilera, with the organization New Generation Cuba. "If we become united we can expel all dictators and restore democracy."

Sandra James, 29, and Marjeory Therancier, 28, both from Haiti, attended the demonstration in Miami, as well another Friday night in Fort Lauderdale, where 5,000 protesters called for the removal of Aristide.

Therancier said her family still lived in Haiti, but would leave for Paris at the end of the month. "My family is hiding out in the countryside; my house was burned," she said.

Rubens Eliatus draped himself in the Haitian flag as he waved at cars on Biscayne Boulevard. Two years ago, he fled his home country, cramming into a small boat with 100 other people. He said he paid \$10,000 for the ride, and entered the county illegally. Eliatus said he was targeted by the Haitian government for protests he mounted while in Haiti. Now his family is targeted, too.

"They tried to kill me," the 27-year-old said. "And, they put me in jail." "I tell the Cuban people, the Venezuelans, and Peruvians to come here and help me and my country get liberty."