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Stop mass deportation from the Dominican Republic to Haiti

Washington and the international community must pressure Santo Domingo to avert impending crisis

June 19, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The Dominican Republic is expected to begin deporting an estimated 500,000 undocumented immigrants after the deadline to file paperwork for adjustment of status expired on June 17. The specter of [mass deportations](#) has raised alarms about an unfolding humanitarian disaster. Yet the crisis has generated little international attention, much less condemnation from world leaders.

Billed by Dominican authorities as a legitimate immigration policy to deal with undocumented immigrants, the policy targets Haitians and those who trace their roots to Haiti. There are two distinct Haitian populations in the Dominican Republic: Dominicans of Haitian descent, born in the country, who were citizens until Santo Domingo unlawfully denationalized them in 2013, and Haitian immigrants, many of whom are low-wage workers engaging in manual and domestic labor.

Dominican nationalists have long agitated to rid the country of its darker-skinned inhabitants. The impending deportations suggest that this social cleansing may now be conducted under the patina of legitimacy. But legal and humane deportations require individual screening and orderly repatriation, not mass expulsions to a ravaged country ill prepared to absorb them.

Immigrants face increasing hostility in the Dominican Republic. Tensions intensified in 2010 after a flood of Haitians crossed the border after the devastating earthquake in Haiti. In February unidentified assailants lynched a Haitian in Santiago, the country's second-largest city, fueling concerns of escalating racial violence. The prospects for repatriated Haitians and expelled

Dominicans are bleak. For Dominican-born children of Haitian descent, Haiti has never been home. Many have no family connections. They do not speak the local language and lack Haitian citizenship or its accompanying rights.

It wasn't always this way. Historically, all children born on Dominican soil were granted citizenship, except children of diplomats and foreigners in transit. But a 2004 migration law extended in-transit status to nonresidents, including undocumented Haitian immigrants. The law retroactively equated people whose families have been in the country for nearly a century with those en route to another destination.

A 2013 [Dominican court decision](#), which stripped citizenship from children of undocumented immigrants born in the Dominican Republic, has rendered more than 200,000 people stateless. After an international outcry, last year the government backpedaled from the unlawful denationalization, creating a path to citizenship for undocumented children born in the country through what was called a regularization process.

Applicants seeking to adjust their status were supposed to obtain the necessary documents by February and complete the process by June 17 or face deportation. But the process has been fraught with delays, bureaucratic impediments and corruption, causing anguish and uncertainty. Few of those eligible for adjustment of legal status have succeeded in changing it.

The US and the rest of the international community must pressure Dominican authorities to end efforts to deport Dominican-born citizens and to halt the impending mass deportations of Haitian immigrants.

The country's well-documented efforts to denationalize Dominican-born children of immigrants suggest that these [problems](#) are at least partly by design. Fewer than half of the country's 500,000 foreign workers who are eligible for legal status have initiated the regularization process. To date, only about [300 have received](#)

[permits](#). And only a small percentage of Dominicans of Haitian origin have started the naturalization process.

For Dominicans of Haitian descent, obtaining proof of birth is difficult. And many immigrants cannot prove they have met the residency requirements or obtain work permits because employers are loath to admit hiring undocumented immigrants. Those born in rural areas or at home are typically not issued birth certificates. The process is further hampered because transportation to immigration processing centers and costs associated with obtaining the paperwork are prohibitive and minor inconsistencies are grounds for denial. And even for those who manage to gather the required documents, the processing centers are underresourced and difficult to navigate.

Those who are not immediately deported, including those with residency permits, will continue to face difficulty accessing basic services. “While the terms ‘resident’ and ‘stateless’ might seem bureaucratic, in reality, legal citizenship can be vital to open up access to education, health care and work, among other fundamental rights,” Erika Guevara Rosas, the Americas director for [Amnesty International](#), wrote in January.

Some Dominican-born people of Haitian descent have refused to accept the second-class status conferred by the naturalization process. Even those who qualify for citizenship will not be entitled to full benefits such as running for office, further enshrining inequality. The timing of the deportations, which coincides with the start of the 2016 election season, has not escaped notice by critics.

The Dominican Republic is dependent on immigrant labor. It is more stable and affluent than its deeply impoverished neighbor. Dominican authorities have a long history of inviting Haitians to work on sugar cane plantations and perform other manual jobs shunned by the locals. But some Dominicans resent the immigrants as a social burden. Despite the inhospitable reception, dire conditions in Haiti have compelled many Haitians to flee instability and poverty. As a result, Haitian immigrants have long been buffeted between nationalist vitriol and the

demand for low-wage laborers, whose precarious legal status leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Meanwhile, Dominican officials continue to send mixed signals about the pace and timing of the deportations, sowing confusion that has only heightened fear and uncertainty. It is still unclear whether deportations will start immediately or after a 45-day grace period. Interior Minister José Ramón Fadul said that authorities will not engage in mass roundups. But the country's immigration agency says its officers will start [patrolling immigrant neighborhoods](#) on June 18 and that security forces have been readied for deportation duty. Authorities have set up [reception centers](#) to house Haitians before repatriation and reserved buses to transport deportees to the border, suggesting that action is imminent.

Dominican officials have staunchly defended the country's right to make sovereign immigration policy decisions and brushed off criticisms about unlawful, inhumane and racially motivated treatment of immigrants. This may explain the U.S. State Department's [muted response](#) to the crisis, as it echoes Washington's approach to its immigration troubles. But the U.S. and the rest of the international community cannot remain silent: They have a moral responsibility to implore Dominican authorities to end efforts to deport Dominican-born citizens and halt the impending mass deportations of Haitian immigrants until they are afforded fair and effective regularization and repatriation processes.

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