

Our Haiti Policy Doesn't Help Anyone

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Body

To the Editor:

Neither of the two components of United States policy toward Haiti, the embargo and the forced repatriation of refugees, is serving the goals of either country. The economic embargo (while well intentioned) has had no impact on changing the repressive political-military regime. Rather, it has produced a colossal economic, environmental and health disaster for Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, as you report in "Land and Health Also Erode in Haiti" (news article, Jan. 28).

The deforestation and soil erosion caused by the embargo will have repercussions for years, perhaps decades, and the famine it has caused is referred to in Haiti as "the curse."

Our refusal to accept the refugees fleeing the country is also in need of change. The Supreme Court, interpreting the law, has lifted the injunction against forced repatriation, making it clear that immigration laws must be altered. We are returning Haitians who risk their lives by boat to escape executions or beatings in their homes or on their streets for more of the same, while accepting Cubans who face no personal fear, but see increasing difficulties ahead.

This differing treatment is the result of: (1) a deep bias in our immigration law favoring anyone fleeing from any Communist country and particularly from Cuba; (2) the greater political influence of the United States-Cuban community compared with the Haitian community, and (3) the fact that the fleeing Haitians, who now number 15,000, are all black and may, in some unknown number of cases, have AIDS. Ironically, our embargo is itself a cause of the growth in the number of refugees we are forcing back. It is a vicious cycle that we are aggravating.

We need to change both policies now. The stranglehold of the military and the Tontons Macoutes cannot be lifted without some form of military intervention. It is too deeply ingrained and too powerful, even if a civilian regime may be temporarily installed. Intervention by a force under the direction of the Organization of American States or the United Nations will be needed, and a subsequent period of trusteeship required to establish democratic institutions and safeguard their emergence.

As for our asylum and refugee rules, the demise of the cold war should be reason enough to end the unequal and unfair application of basic principles of human rights. At a minimum, we should provide temporary protective status to the Haitians who are already here, as we are doing for the Chinese, so they are not forced to return until after the current political oppression and retributions end. We gave 125,000 Cubans permanent asylum when they fled in the Mariel boat lift of 1980 and gave 100,000 Nicaraguans asylum from the Sandinista Government in the 80's.

It is time we reviewed our asylum-refugee rules so they reflect the true risks faced by any individuals, fleeing any oppressive or brutal regime, no matter what the ideological bent of that regime, or the ethnicity of the refugees.

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New York, Feb. 3, 1992

The writer is a lawyer who has dealt with immigration matters.

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