

Fairness for Refugees

Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)

November 25, 1991, Monday

Copyright 1991 The Christian Science Publishing Society

Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. 20

Length: 357 words

Body

THE treatment of refugees agonizes the world. No region has escaped the wrenching choice of asylum or repatriation. Are people fleeing economic disaster or political repression, or some terrible mixture of both?

The questions are easier to deal with when the crises are far away in Eastern Europe or Hong Kong. The United States doesn't have that convenience with the desperate Haitian refugees struggling to reach its shores. They come from a country that occupies the cellar of the world economy. Politics there have historically been synonymous with violence, a tradition renewed since the overthrow Sept. 30 of a popularly elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The refugee stream didn't start with the coup. But the coup heightened the dilemma for the US. Before that event, it might have been easier for Washington to pursue repatriation on the grounds that most Haitians were simply fleeing poverty. But with an illegitimate regime in place, inclined to use any means to prevent a return to the populist policies of Aristide, that argument is tottering. What happens to returning Haitians? No one knows for sure, since monitoring is nearly impossible.

The State Department asserts that its motive in repatriating Haitians is to prevent loss of life. Hundreds have perished as their pitiful craft were swamped, and hundreds more will be tempted to follow if refugees are allowed to reach Florida. That concern can't be dismissed out of hand.

But a greater concern, given the global scope of the refugee problem, is how the US treats these people. They should be given safe haven until their fitness for permanent asylum is fairly determined. Quickie determination of their status aboard a Coast Guard cutter doesn't suffice. The US should be willing to serve as a country of first asylum, as it has demanded of others.

Neither left-over cold-war attitudes - that only those fleeing communism are automatically "refugees" - nor considerations of race or poverty should affect the Haitians' status.

The US has to uphold the highest standards of fairness in this matter, or risk having the charge of hypocrisy stick.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: COUPS (90%); RESETTLEMENT & REPATRIATION (90%); REFUGEES (90%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); STATE DEPARTMENTS & FOREIGN SERVICES (78%); POLITICS (78%); COLD WAR (78%); ECONOMIC CONDITIONS (78%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (78%)

Fairness for Refugees

Geographic: UNITED STATES (95%); HAITI (94%); EUROPE (79%); EASTERN EUROPE (58%)

End of Document