

HOW CAN IT HAPPEN HERE? HAITIANS THOUGHT TORTURE WAS IN THEIR PAST

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Body

Since Abner Louima's alleged beating and torture at the hands of cops in Brooklyn, the Haitian immigrant has lain in his hospital bed, repeatedly asking how such a thing could happen in New York City.

His plaintive question resounds in shock and anger among the more than 300,000 Haitians here.

It is the issue that galvanizes their community like no other, given the fact that they fled their island to escape a ruthless police force.

"Everybody can relate to the incident. They are familiar with the subject of police brutality," said Ninaj Raoul, director of Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, a group in Brooklyn that has aided more than 1,000 refugees since 1992.

"When they come here, they think initially that the police are better, but after a while, they see the same. One woman here saw the newspaper and said, 'Oh, it's just like in Haiti.' "

"It is ironic that they flee a land where they were terribly oppressed, a place with no concept of civilian policing like we have, to come here and be subjected to this," said Raymond Kelly, the former New York police commissioner who led a multi-national team of monitors to overhaul Haiti's police in 1995.

"It is just shocking," Kelly said.

Douglas Shenson, who runs the Human Rights Clinic in the Bronx, saw more than a dozen Haitians seeking asylum in 1994, some so traumatized they couldn't look at anyone dressed in military-type clothing.

"That this is the extraordinary irony is an accurate observation," Shenson said. "The level of torture [Louima] alleges is precisely the nature of the persecution many individuals suffered during those years of repression in Haiti."

More than 66,000 Haitians have immigrated legally to the U.S. since 1992, after a military coup ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Thousands more arrived illegally, refugees who took their chances on rickety boats rather than face uniformed authorities or the forces of the most feared man in Haiti, Emmanuel (Toto) Constant.

He operated a death squad known as FRAPH the Revolutionary Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti which murdered thousands of people between 1991 and 1994

"Americans can understand and believe what we have been saying, that people were tortured and killed every day by Constant," said Jacqueline Celestin, a Haitian human rights activist.

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"But to happen in New York? America? It is so shocking, you can't imagine."

Last Saturday, the same day that Louima was allegedly the victim of an act of police brutality unprecedented in the city, a handful of Haitians marched in protest on the Queens street where Constant has been living for three years.

Like many of the refugees who fled his campaign of terror, Constant applied for political asylum in the U.S. His stay was recently extended for six months.

He is believed to have been a CIA operative, and activists are trying to get him extradited to Haiti to stand trial.

"Immigration laws are not normally used to protect persecutors," said Ron Daniels, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Although FRAPH operatives were particularly vicious, the regular police force also committed atrocities.

"The police were part of the army, the structure was the police and attaches who were like auxiliary police, and they effected control by widespread brutality, killing as many as 4,000 people for political purposes," said Kelly.

"They would kill people and leave the bodies in vacant lots as messages to others. Pigs would eat the bodies. People were afraid to claim them."

The police did not pursue criminals, only the perceived enemies of the government.

"We had to teach them basic concepts of human dignity, which they didn't possess," Kelly said. "They had power. It was natural to abuse that power."

After the monitors left, a civilian police force took over, but "there is no big difference now," said Celestin. "Poor people are still suffering in Haiti. There is no justice system."

People there continue to fear men in uniforms.

And those who live here still carry that fear.

Only a few people protested outside the stucco house on 225th St. in Laurelton where Constant has been living, because they are afraid of him, and FRAPH. But Celestin believes the next protest will draw more people.

"This incident with Mr. Louima will mobilize us to stand tall together, to call for justice, and it will help us in the campaign against Constant," said Celestin.

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