

## **Help the Guantanamo Haitians**

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### **Body**

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More than 200 Haitians infected with the AIDS virus languish in a primitive camp on the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, forbidden to enter this country and unable to return home for fear of persecution. Despite the ban on immigrants infected with the AIDS virus, there are strong humanitarian and political reasons to make an exception for this small band of refugees.

Their plight overrides the small medical risks and the costs they might impose. And they would not bring the same problems as would a large wave of permanent immigrants.

This page recently counseled against lifting the ban on *immigration* by individuals infected with the AIDS virus unless it could be shown that the risk of spreading disease was negligible and that the costs could be borne by an overburdened health care system. Immigration is not a "right" but a privilege extended to some 700,000 individuals each year from a huge applicant pool.

But *refugees* seeking political asylum have a stronger claim. Unlike immigrants, political refugees face the risk of death, imprisonment or persecution in their homeland. That's why United Nations treaties and U.S. law forbid returning any refugees who have a well-founded fear of persecution. The refugees do not have to be admitted to the U.S., but they cannot be sent back home. Most of the Haitians at Guantanamo Bay have already persuaded American officials that they have a plausible fear of persecution at home -- and half have passed the next hurdle, persuading officials that they have a well-founded fear. Now they seek to come to the U.S. to pursue their claims for asylum. Some 10,000 other Haitian refugees have already been allowed into the U.S. while their claims are being processed. Those held in Cuba differ only in their infection by AIDS.

This small group poses a minor risk of spreading AIDS and would not be a heavy financial burden. It probably costs more to keep them at Guantanamo than it would to treat all of them for AIDS in the U.S. And the Government needn't bear those costs: John Cardinal O'Connor has said the Archdiocese of New York would help find jobs, living quarters and hospital care.

To detain the infected Haitians in a crowded, filthy camp at Guantanamo is inhumane and dangerous. The risk of catching infections is especially great for individuals whose immune systems are under attack by the AIDS virus. The infected Haitians need to be moved. Their only likely haven is the United States. The Attorney General, who has the authority, should waive them in.

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## Help the Guantanamo Haitians

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