

JAMAICA TO AID U.S. ON HAITIANS; ACCORD MEANS REFUGEES WILL GET INTERVIEWS ABOARD SHIPS IN PORTS

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

June 2, 1994, THURSDAY, THREE STAR Edition

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 7A

Length: 364 words

Dateline: WASHINGTON

Body

Haitian refugees picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard will be taken to a Jamaican port for shipboard interviews to present their cases for political asylum, the State Department announced Wednesday.

The accord followed discussions between U.S. and Jamaican officials after President Bill Clinton pledged May 8 to abandon his policy of automatic forced repatriation of all Haitian boat people.

Christine Shelly, a State Department spokeswoman, said Jamaica had agreed to allow interviews of Haitian boat migrants in Jamaican territorial waters.

"Those who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution if they are sent back to Haiti will be resettled in the United States or other countries," she said. Others will be returned to Haiti. The United States will pay the costs.

But officials said the agreement with Jamaica might not be sufficient for the problem. The United States continued to look for other Caribbean nations and territories to agree to similar arrangements. Officials raised the possibility that the Turks and Caicos Islands, to the north of Haiti, also might play a role in refugee processing.

In Kingston, Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson told Parliament that the operation would not last more than six months.

Until now, the only escape route available to Haitians fearful of persecution has been U.S. processing centers inside Haitian territory. Officials have said that the majority of Haitian boat people are economic refugees who have no legal claim to take up residence in the United States.

Meanwhile, Haiti blamed bureaucrats for freezing almost \$ 12 million in U.S. humanitarian aid and insisted Wednesday that it was not trying to discourage international relief efforts. U.S. officials say the freeze was ordered by Haiti's military rulers and could endanger life-sustaining food shipments to hundreds of thousands of Haitians. William Schauer, a U.S. Embassy spokesman, called the freeze "an illegal act."

The money, from the sale of wheat flour, is meant to pay for job-creation programs and for transportation, fuel and other costs run up by three private relief groups feeding Haitians under a U.S. aid contract.

Classification

Language: English

JAMAICA TO AID U.S. ON HAITIANS; ACCORD MEANS REFUGEES WILL GET INTERVIEWS ABOARD
SHIPS IN PORTS

Subject: REFUGEES (89%); STATE DEPARTMENTS & FOREIGN SERVICES (86%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (69%); PUBLIC OFFICIALS (69%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (69%); RESETTLEMENT & REPATRIATION (69%); AGREEMENTS (68%); INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE (68%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (64%); PRIME MINISTERS (64%)

Company: STATE DEPARTMENT FEDERAL CREDIT UNION INC (61%); STATE DEPARTMENT FEDERAL CREDIT UNION INC (61%); US COAST GUARD (84%); US COAST GUARD (84%)

Organization: US COAST GUARD (84%); US COAST GUARD (84%)

Person: BILL CLINTON (54%)

Geographic: KINGSTON, JAMAICA (78%); HAITI (99%); JAMAICA (95%); UNITED STATES (94%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (79%); TURKS & CAICOS ISLANDS (79%)

Load-Date: June 3, 1994