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Sunday, August 16, 2009

Human trafficking and Dominican migration to St Maarten

By Thomson Fontaine

It is a hot summer day late in 2005 and passengers on the boat called "Trik Pony" know that something is wrong. The boat has begun to take on water and their captain has abandoned ship, taking the only safety craft on board, claiming that he was going on shore for help.



Passengers trying to enter St Maarten illegally on this leaky vessel in June 2005 are relieved at been rescued.

More than four hours have passed and the passengers are becoming more desperate. They know that if help does not arrive soon they could all drown. The sails on their leaky craft is torn and the vessel weighed down by the weight of the passengers and now water is drifting aimlessly in the waters of the Caribbean.

A few among the 62 men, women and children on board can swim and begin to prepare themselves for a possible swim to shore. Unfortunately, the shore is no where in sight. They are 40 miles away from the nearest piece of land in St Maarten, panic begins to set in.

Suddenly, there is a glimmer of hope. One of the female passengers from Dominica eagerly peers at her mobile phone, the only one on the entire boat. She has some signal. As anxious passengers look on, she dials a number and within moments she is patched through to the ST Maarten police.

Within minutes, a coast helicopter and police boat are dispatched to search for the distressed vessel. It is soon found and after about one hour, the relieved passengers are towed to shore. The captain and his rubber dinghy are also located and he is hauled off to jail.

Their joy at rescue is however short-lived. Within a day of being rescued, the 52 Haitians and 10 Dominicans are on a chartered flight to Dominica.

The dramatic sea rescue was front page news in St Maarten, where the passengers were been smuggled to. This was nothing new to the St Maarten authorities. They already had confirmation from Dominica that there was an organized human trafficking trade centered in Dominica. What was different this time though was the large number of Haitians involved.

The authorities in St Maarten were already making noises about the large number of undocumented immigrants in their country. This time they were determined to act swiftly to put an end to this new threat.

Before the heavy flow of largely Haitian immigrants through Dominica in 2004 and 2005, several thousand Dominicans had already moved to that Island. Many in search of better opportunities in a country famed for its duty-free shopping and hordes of tourists.

In the past, the authorities had complained bitterly to Dominica about its inability to stop the flow of migrants pointing to the ease with which visitors could enter Dominica. They wanted action and were determined to fight to prevent the problem from escalating.

In April 2005, they had requested and got talks with the Dominica government on the human smuggling issue. Talks followed a case in which the captain and a crew member, both from Dominica, of L'Eternel est Grand had to appear in court on human smuggling charges. The boat had been packed with more than 40 persons and two persons had drowned. The captain was subsequently found guilty and sentenced.

In June of that same year, another boat captain from Dominica Jeremiah Flerin of the Dominica-registered boat Liberty was found guilty of human smuggling and sentenced to an unconditional jail penalty of four years. Four of the boat's 51 passengers were from the Dominican Republic, 45 came from Haiti, while the captain and his assistant were Dominica nationals. The boat was only registered to hold 5 persons.

Their response would now be aimed at both the unwanted

immigrants risking their lives to come by sea and those who were coming legally disguised as tourists, and had taken up residence in St Maarten. Up to that point, Dominicans and most other visitors could enter the Dutch side of St Maarten without entry visas.

In January of 2006 through the Franco-Dutch Treaty, the authorities sought to control persons entering St. Maarten/St. Martin (St Maarten is Dutch and St Martin French). Visa restrictions were imposed for nationals of Dominica, Jamaica, Guyana and Suriname.

By the time the visa restrictions came into effect, there were already approximately 2,568 Dominicans residing in St. Maarten from a population of about 20,000 undocumented immigrants, from over one hundred countries. Haitians led the way with the most undocumented immigrants followed by the Dominica Republic, Dominica and then Jamaica.

The number of undocumented migrants from Dominica living in St Maarten is about twice the number of those legally registered. In the 1998 elections in that country, 577 Dominicans were registered to vote with a further 500 believed to be living there legally.

These estimates would put the number of Dominicans residing in St Maarten at about 3,600 or approximately 4 percent of that country's population.

The authorities have also moved more aggressively to return undocumented migrants to their home countries. In 2004, more than 311 were sent back including 47 from Dominica. During 2005 – 2008, a further 186 were repatriated to Dominica. It is widely believed that a significant number of those sent back reentered the county illegally using boats from Dominica.

In addition to immigration control, the authorities have instituted a more stringent employment permit policy, which the country's labor commissioner said was geared towards reducing the exploitation of foreign labor and promoting the hiring of locals.

While the active trade in human smuggling has been largely curtailed, the daily challenges of Dominicans residing in St Maarten continues. For many who left their country in search of better living conditions, it has been a difficult journey, one made all the more challenging with the onslaught of the global crisis.

However, unless the economic situation in Dominica improves, it is likely that many will continue to risk life and limb as they go in search of a better life just across the sun drenched horizon.



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// posted by TheDominican.net @ 1:46 PM

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When will Dominicans stop running from their country and go and see 'misai' is somebody else country. As for me let me suffer in DA rather than go through this crap in another man's country.


posted by  Culbert : August 16, 2009 3:51 PM

I agree why the rush to leave DA? SUREly we can do better!


posted by  Jones : August 17, 2009 10:17 AM

Dr. Thomson Fountaine I must inform you that the passengers on that boat were from Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Spanish). All had entered Dominica legally and were attempting to leave illigally through the back door.

Police Officer

posted by  Anonymous : August 17, 2009 12:11 PM

Thanks for that correction Mr. Officer!

posted by  Anonymous : August 18, 2009 12:45 PM

Dear police officer you are quite correct. I am sure you are also aware that it is far more beneficial for the Dominican govt. for these legal immigrants leave our shores illegally. It absolves them from having to refund the U.S.\$1,000 (invariably paid in cash) we ask our "brothers & sisters" to deposit with us upon arrival on the promise that they will get it back when they leave Dominica legally. A very nice business indeed, not to mention the exorbitant fees charged by enterprising Dominican boat operators to the same "brothers & sisters". What a hypocritical bunch we are. No wonder the authorities in Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Maarten give us such a hard time!

posted by  Anonymous : August 18, 2009 5:25 PM

Mr Police officer please note that in the article it states clearly that "Within a day of being rescued, the 52 Haitians and 10 Dominicans are on a chartered flight to Dominica."


Unfortunately both the "Spanish' and English are called Dominicans. I also noted that most Dominicans (English - us) go in as tourists and only occasionally go via the back door.

But, thanks for making it clear to our many readers.....

thomson

posted by  thomson : August 18, 2009 8:42 PM

Good article focusing on a side of Dominica that we prefer not to think about but which is very much a part of our history.

posted by  James : August 20, 2009 9:42 AM

Why bare Dominicans running away from such a beautiful country?

posted by  John : August 22, 2009 3:35 PM

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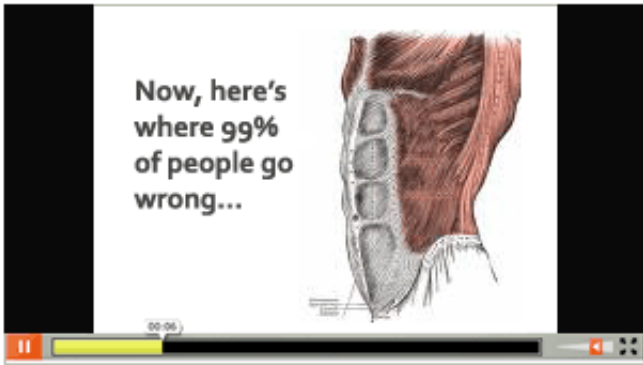
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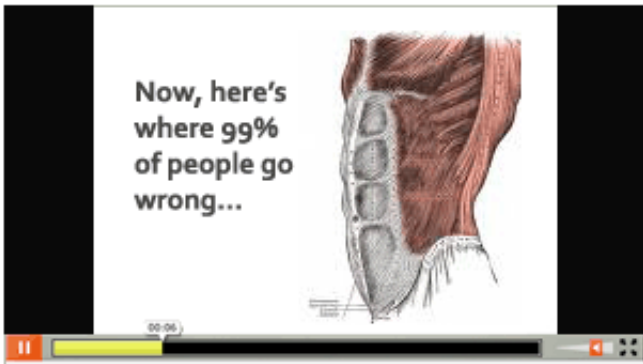


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