Captors, refugees bid sad goodbyes

BY MARJORIE VALBRUN
Herald Staff Writer

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — It was a very peculiar sight.

Three hundred fifteen Haitian refugees saying gentle good-byes to their powerful captors — who in turn patted their shoulders, shook their hands and wished them well.

It was not what one would expect from a group being forced to return to a place they want desperately to leave. It was not what one would imagine of another group viewed as bullies.

As a boatload of Haitian refugees caught at sea last week was repatriated here Tuesday by the U.S. Coast Guard, a heart-warming picture emerged from an ugly scenario: Sympathetic Coast Guard officers doing an unpopular job. Understanding Haitian refugees not blaming them for doing it.

"I want to have this for my photo album," one officer said when she finished photographing some of the refugees. "It's my first time seeing something like this. It's very sad."

The officer, who declined to give her name, stared sadly down from her cutter's deck as the refugees were guided along the dock below.

As the refugees left the cutter Dallas, several Coast Guard officers helped them carry their bags. Two officers carried an injured man, others helped those who were too weak to walk alone.

'Got us back alive'

"'I'm not mad," said Assu Desir. "At least they got us back here alive."

But even while this display of humanity was taking place, it was clear it will not be enough to change the anger and resentment against the controversial U.S. policy of sending back Haitian boat people intercepted at sea.

One man stood on the sidelines watching Coast Guard officers unload their human cargo and shook his head.

"If you would give them visas they wouldn't have to do this," he shouted indignantly to no one in particular. "Give them visas, damn it."

It was an uncommon, though small, expression of protest. There has been little speaking out in Haiti since the army took over after a violent Sept. 30 coup that removed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power.

But unlike Monday, when Haitian onlookers were conspicuously absent during the return of more than 200 Haitian refugees, a couple of dozen people came out Tuesday...

More abundant also were armed soldiers — more than two dozen, compared to Monday's seven.

Stock answers

The soldiers' presence appeared to have some effect: Most of the returning refugees said poverty, not the military coup, drove them toward Miami's shores. And each time they were asked if the politics here contributed to their decision, they gave the same stock answer: "I don't know anything about that. I'm not into politics."

Some even said they had never heard of Aristide, even those from the pro-Aristide stronghold of Gonaives, in northern Haiti.

Achille Desulte, 35, who traveled aboard a Miami boat with one of her five children, insisted, "I don't know anything about politics. I don't follow politics. I'm more concerned about me and me and my kids surviving."

Elmira Noel, who is from Gonaives, left her husband, Lonner, behind with four of their seven children "in search of a new life."

They own a small plot of land they farm to grow vegetables, but the crooked land produces "just enough to feed the family and not enough to sell," she said.

Not many planned trip

For some, little or no planning went into the trip. Many said they saw a boat leaving, learned the trip was free and hopped aboard.

But Evelyne Jean-Philppe, 40, a rice vendor who traveled with her 6-month-old son Wiggins and daughter Yveline, 19, said she wanted something more: some dignity.

She sat barefoot on the floor nursing her son and waiting to be processed by the Haitian Red Cross. She wore a dirty, sweaty, polyester dress that clung to her. Her skin was covered with dirt. An old scarf covered her matted hair.

"I wanted to go to Miami because when Haitians from Miami visit here they always look so beautiful, their hair is clean and pretty. I would like to be beautiful too."
Judge in refugee case known for by-the-book fancies

Flights were interrupted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard. November 20, 1994, The Miami Herald

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Stop Haitian interdiction!

IT SEEMS incredible to have to be saying anew, more than a decade later, what The Herald first said in September 1981, when the Reagan Administration first began stopping boatloads of Haitians. This interdiction — of Haitians and only of these black people, no other — is racist. It is immoral, a deal struck with a Duvalier devil. It shames this great nation. It must stop.

To no other people except this hemisphere’s poorest, blackest nation does the United States, beacon of liberty, give not just its back but the back of its hand. To no other people does Washington say: “We have placed an economic embargo against those who usurped your government, but we will not let you flee its consequences.”

Search the Judeo-Christian ethic from topmost to keel, and you’ll find no moral justification for this interdiction policy. It hangs like an albatross, dead these 10 years and two months, around the Statue of Liberty. It turns her stomach.

But not the Bush Administration’s. On Monday, the Bush heirs of the Reagan policy began returning to Haiti the first of some 2,000 Haitians interdicted at sea. Yesterday Federal Judge Donald Graham in Miami halted the repatriation. He granted a temporary restraining order requested by the Haitian Refugee Center, Inc. (HRC) of Miami. Bless you, Judge!


Let’s examine the barest figures. From September 1981 to June 1991, more than 24,000 Haitians were interdicted. Only 28 — twenty-eight! — were found eligible for political asylum. Of the 2,000-plus Haitians interdicted since the Sept. 30 coup, only 53 have been ruled eligible for asylum.

Only 53. Do no others have a well-founded fear of persecution if returned to a land whose rogue soldiers have killed hundreds — nobody knows the total — since overthrowing President Jean-Bertrand Aristide? Or is 53 just a sample? Given Haiti’s violence since Sept. 30, how many of these boat people might be judged legitimate political refugees if they had a full and fair opportunity to make their case?

But these hearings cannot be fair, because they cannot be full. Though longer than before, the hearings remain unduly brief. The Haitians are frightened; often seasick, probably unable to comprehend the legal gravity of their interview with the INS officers aboard the Coast Guard cutters. In short, of all people who deserve due process, these Haitians do.

But they are black. They are poor. They are powerless. Because Haitians are black, and poor, and powerless, the U.S. Government sends its ships near their island and stuffs them back when they try to flee.

Some argue that interdiction is piracy. No nation owns the high seas. No nation has the right, outside its own territorial waters, to stop foreign vessels and force foreign citizens to go where they wish not to go.

But Washington struck this interdiction deal with the Duvalier despots. So it is not piracy, one supposes. It’s only Faustian.

The chaos in Haiti is going to get worse before it gets better. In order to cleanse its own conscience and play by its own rules, the United States must stop this interdiction. Then it should treat Haitians as it would treat any other nationality. It should:

○ Allow Haitians the human right to leave their country and to sail wherever the current carries them. If some perish, and some surely will, they do so as free people making free choices.

○ Haitians reaching U.S. shores should be given full due-process rights, not a hurried, truncated shipboard hearing.

○ Haitians who can show a well-founded fear of persecution should be granted asylum. Those who cannot should be returned home, like any other illegal alien found ineligible for asylum.

○ As the number of Haitians granted asylum increases, as it inevitably will, Washington must recognize that South Florida’s counties cannot be expected to foot the bill for the consequences of U.S. policy. We’ve paid Washington’s bills for too long. The White House must stand ready to send refugee-aid funds to this area.

If the White House won’t halt this interdiction voluntarily, it invites, Judge Graham to rule that the result of interdiction — repatriation — is illegal as now done. Illegal or not, it is racist and immoral.
Let the Haitians in!

To The Editor:

We still haven't learned a thing after 50 years. My heart aches every time I read about the plight of the Haitians being kept at sea aboard Coast Guard cutters while some bureaucrat in Washington decides their fate.

I remember my father telling me the story of the St. Louis, a ship filled with Jews fleeing Hitler, being turned away from Havana by Cuban authorities and later from Miami Beach by the U.S. Coast Guard. Human cargo is human cargo is human cargo, regardless of color, religion, or economic means.

Let the Haitians in!

JOSÉ PEREZ DE CORCHO
Miami
Return of Haitians suspended

By The Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti —

The United States Tuesday sent home 500 Haitians who fled in small boats after the Sept. 20 military coup. But a U.S. judge ordered the government to stop the repatriation.

A U.S. Coast Guard cutter had picked up the 500 Haitians after the coup and detained them while the Bush administration weighed what steps to take. Monday, it moved to return them to the impoverished Caribbean country.

About 20 policemen looked on while immigration officials processed the Haitians who had raised their hands to flee. Red Cross officials said they would examine the refugees and give them $10 each.

One refugee, who spoke on condition of anonymity, "I've tried to leave before. Every time I do, they catch me. I'm not going to try again."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the refugees continued fleeing Haiti despite the U.S. decision to return them. The Coast Guard has picked up 2,100 since the coup, he said.

Hours after the first group was returned, U.S. District Judge Donald Graham in Miami halted the repatriation until another hearing Monday.

The Haitian Refugee Center in Miami had challenged the repatriation, saying the government failed to grant the refugees their rights.

Haitians, many fearing reprisal, began fleeing after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, their first democratically elected president, was toppled by the military. Many were retrieved by Coast Guard cutters stationed near Haiti's coast.

About 600 are in U.S. custody at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and the rest are aboard Coast Guard cutters. Venezuela, Belize, Honduras and Trinidad and Tobago had offered to take in at least 500 of the Haitians, and U.S. officials said those held at Guantanamo Bay will be sent to those countries first.

After failing to persuade countries in the area to provide shelter for more Haitians, the State Department said that most of the Haitians were being sent home immediately.

The State Department says it believes the refugees are fleeing Haiti for economic reasons, not because they fear persecution. But members of Congress and human rights officials have criticized the Bush administration, which they said Britain for forcibly repatriating Vietnamese who had fled to Hong Kong.

Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., accused the administration of racism, saying Washington would have never turned back fleeing Europeans.

The director of the refugee project for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Arthur C. Halton, said Tuesday there was no reason to repatriate the Haitians.

"There are true refugee emergencies, and this is not one of them," Halton said.

Boucher said the overriding U.S. objective has been to save lives. Many have died on the high seas, he said.

"It's important to note that there is no history of any persecution of boat people who've been returned to Haiti," Boucher said.

Haitian legislative leaders said Tuesday they would not attend a meeting with Aristide and officials of the Organization of American States in Colombia this weekend unless the trade embargo is eased. The OAS earlier said the meeting would meet Raul in Cartagena. Co-