Coast Guard to return 1,700 boat people to Haiti; 49 are found eligible to stay

From Wire Reports

WASHINGTON — Some 1,700 Haitian boat people, unable to find a safe haven after fleeing their troubled homeland, are being returned to Haiti by the Coast Guard, the State Department said yesterday.

An announcement said that the Bush administration decided on that course after an unsuccessful effort to persuade Caribbean and South American and Central American countries to provide temporary shelter to the Haitians.

"In the absence of a sufficient safe-haven option, the Coast Guard has been directed to return most of the boat people to Haiti beginning on Monday," the State Department said.

Haitians have been fleeing their homeland in droves for the United States in recent weeks, and the exodus expanded dramatically over the weekend. Voice of America broadcasts sought to discourage Haitians from fleeing.

As of yesterday morning, nearly 1,800 Haitians had been picked up. About 1,500 were aboard Coast Guard vessels near Haiti, and the remainder were being cared for at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Forty-nine of the Haitians were declared eligible to apply for political asylum in the United States and were flown to Miami yesterday. Immigration officials concluded that the 49 faced the threat of political persecution if they were returned to Haiti.

Virtually all the remainder apparently are ineligible for political asylum because they were considered economic refugees.

Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla., and Representative Charles B. Rangel, D-N.Y., called the decision an outrage.

"It is an outrage to send innocent people back to a country led by a violent, illegal military dictatorship," said Mr. Mack, usually a strong supporter of administration policy.

"Returning Vietnamese, Russian Jews, Cubans, Nicaraguans and others back to the repressive countries from which they were fleeing would have been unthinkable. How can we justify it for Haitians?" Mr. Mack said in a statement.

"We would not say no if the refugees were European," Mr. Rangel added in a separate statement. He called the decision "a racist and vicious policy."

The refugee flow began after the Sept. 9 military coup in Haiti that deposed the country's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Patricia Fagen, a spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, said 'the high commissioner has expressed her concern over the possibility of unilateral action by any government forcing Haitian asylum-seekers back.'

She said her agency is working to avoid the return of the asylum seekers.

The State Department announcement said the decision to return the Haitians was based on "fear that any action by the United States to bring large numbers of Haitians without claim to asylum to the United States would create a massive outflow, resulting in large numbers of deaths on the high seas."

Baltimore Sun
19 November '91
U.S. Begins Forcible Return
Of Haitians Who Fled Coup

By HOWARD W. FRENCH
Special to The New York Times

MIAMI, Nov. 18 — With more than 1,000 Haitian boat people being held aboard United States Coast Guard cutters, the State Department announced today that it was starting to send them back, resuming a repatriation program suspended since a violent coup overthrew Haiti's elected Government on Sept. 30.

The decision came after a weekend in which Coast Guard ships picked up hundreds of new refugees from small boats off northern Haiti, bringing the total number of Haitians in United States custody to nearly 1,800. In addition to those still at sea, officials said, about 500 refugees are being temporarily housed in the United States' military base at Guantánamo, Cuba.

Officials said the decision to resume forcible repatriation of the Haitians, which quickly drew attacks from human rights groups, was made out of exasperation after weekend Voice of America broadcasts to Haiti urging listeners not to set out for United States shores failed to stem the flow of would-be refugees.

'A Very Tough Thing'

The State Department officials said that the first of seven Coast Guard cutters harboring Haitians would begin disembarking Haitians in Port-au-Prince today.

"This is obviously a very tough thing to deal with," said an official who asked not to be identified. He said that the billeting of the boat people on Coast Guard vessels had been conceived as an interim solution.

"Our objective was to try and take care of people leaving Haiti without sending a signal to others on the island that it is O.K. for them to try to come to the United States," he said.

In recent days, the official added, the United States had persuaded several other countries in the region, including Belize, Venezuela, Trinidad and Honduras, to accept some of the boat people picked up by the Coast Guard.

Deaths at Sea Feared

"We regret that it now appears that the safe-haven plan will not be sufficient to deal with the magnitude of the problem," said a statement by the State Department announcing the decision to resume repatriations. "We fear that any action by the United States to bring large numbers of Haitians without claim to asylum to the United States would bring a massive outflow resulting in large numbers of deaths on the high seas."

Coast Guard officials announced today that seven of the recently intercepted Haitian boats carried more than 100 people. One seized on Nov. 14 was a 46-foot vessel of questionable seaworthiness with 238 people aboard, they added.

Officials estimate that as many as half of those who undertake the ocean voyage to the United States die at sea. A United States official said that the refugees now in Guantánamo would most likely be distributed among the nations that had agreed to receive limited numbers of Haitian boat people.

Those living aboard United States ships, the official said, will be interviewed in accordance with a 10-year-old agreement with Haiti. Those who do not meet standards for admission to the United States, where they can petition for political asylum, will be returned to Haiti beginning today, he said.

"Most of these people do not have a legitimate fear of persecution," the official said, adding that so far about 50 had been allowed into the United States to apply for asylum. "Those who do will be allowed into the United States."

While officials in Washington sought to play down the risk faced by returning Haitians, the repatriation announcement immediately drew an angry reaction from some members of Congress and immigration rights groups, who noted the continuing climate of violence in Haiti since the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

"This would not have happened if the refugees were Europeans," said Representative Charles B. Rangel, Democrat of New York, who said he had been scheduled to visit Guantánamo on Sunday to inspect refugee conditions until the trip was suddenly canceled. "It's the difference, I guess, between exporting oil and bananas."

'How Can We Justify It?'

Senator Connie Mack, Republican of Florida, also sharply criticized the decision to return to the repatriation policy that was in effect before the coup. "Returning Vietnamese, Russian Jews, Cubans, Nicaraguans and others back to the repressive countries from which they were fleeing would have been unthinkable," he said in a statement. "How can we justify it for Haitians?"

Jocelyn McCalla, director of the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees, a New York-based group, said, "What is most distressing is that the United States has clearly not extended recognition to the military junta in Port-au-Prince and is not even talking to them."

"There are clearly a good number of people who go back and suffer persecution or go into hiding," Mr. McCalla said, rebutting United States claims that returned refugees were unlikely to face punishment in Haiti.

Another group, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, said it was contemplating legal action to bar future repatriations. "The cursory interviews by immigration officials are incapable of determining which individuals merit protection," said Arthur C. Helton, a lawyer with the group, commenting on the screening of refugees at sea.

Some diplomats suggested that in addition to the growing burden on the Coast Guard's resources, the decision to begin repatriating Haitians grew out of a belief that progress was near in efforts led by the Organization of American States to restore Haiti's elected Government.

"Haiti is a democracy, even if it is a suspended democracy right now," one official said. "The O.A.S. mission there just came out with good results and we hope to see negotiations begin this week for a return to constitutional order."

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New York Times
19 Nov
Haitians’ faith tenuous under weight of violence

By MARJORIE VALBRUN
Herald Staff Writer

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — It wasn’t your normal church blessing, but then these aren’t normal times.

“Now one should go out and protest today,” the young layman told the congregation at St. Gerard Catholic Church at the end of their service.

“We have had too much bloodshed already. We have had too many arrests. Go to your homes and pray instead.”

After a week of scattered violence, Haitians flocked to their churches Sunday to try to renew their faith in God.

But many, including a prominent priest, say that faith has been seriously tested by events of the past week — for that matter, the past seven weeks since the military seized control of the country and ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a leftist priest beloved by the poor.

Last Monday, the badly beaten bodies of five young men, with their hands bound behind their backs, were found in a ditch — casualties of a callous military, locals say.

On Tuesday, more than 75 students protesting at the University of Haiti were arrested and beaten by military police and soldiers as sportsmen looked on.

Twenty-seven have been released. No one knows the fate of the others.

That same day, on the other side of town, soldiers in civilian clothing stormed St. Gerard after some ne’aggers protested outside. A young woman was later arrested.

“We don’t know if she’s dead or alive. We don’t know their motive,” said the Rev. Hugo Triest.

Later that day, as the soldiers continued searching for young protesters, Triest said they arrested a 3-year-old boy and nearly trampled him to death.

The boy said soldiers forced him to witness the executions of 20 people. The child’s life was spared because his mother paid the soldiers.

Each day the violence continues, and each day its victims ask when it will end.

The flight of Haitians from the land on rocky boats also continues. Over the weekend, the U.S. Coast Guard picked up 373 more refugees, bringing the total to 1,575 in three weeks — nearly half of the 1,399 Haitians found at sea this year.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 1991, THE MIAMI HERALD 7A

By the end of last week many in Port-au-Prince were talking about a huge protest rally planned after Sunday’s 7 a.m. Mass at St. Gerard.

It never materialized. Maybe it was because the Rev. Michel Lachance, who celebrated the Mass, urged prudence and said, “Let’s keep our faith in the Lord.”

Whatever the reason, the struggle is far from over.

“The repression here is very severe,” said a young man named Charles who didn’t want his last name used. “I don’t think the masses will sit back and wait for God to come.”

Charles is one of the founders of the National Federation of Haitian Students, which organized the university demonstration.

“Here, you have no rights,” he said. “The right to speak out or protest, the right of journalists to report what is going on — all of that has been violated.”

Even Triest, a well-known liberation theologian, says that sometimes faith is deepened by all these experiences, admits his own has taken a beating.

“Every day my faith is badly tested by everything I see and hear. I’m indignant because people ask us what is wrong here,” he said. “With all the atrocities and violence you just have to open your eyes and look around. This government is the devil incarnate.”

Triest speaks from experience. He was arrested and expelled from Haiti in 1985 for speaking out against the government — which at the time was also under military control.

B.R., 25, an accounting student at the University of Haiti who was arrested during Tuesday’s demonstration, shares Triest’s view.

She said she suffered a brutal beating in jail — she still has bruises and gashes — for refusing to say “vive l’arme,” or “long live the army.”

“Every day, every second, human rights are being violated here,” she said. “But the Haitian people won’t stand for it. The military knows this, and that is why they are so afraid.”

“No matter if they kill one, two or 100 people. They cannot kill six million people. The ones that remain will always fight back.”

Still, for others, an unshaken faith remains. And that, not small acts of defiance, is what will get them through this crisis, they say.

Said Pierre Gary, 26, secretary of St. Gerard’s Pastoral Liturgy Committee who delivered the message calling for prudence at Sunday’s Mass: “During the Mass I felt a force in me telling me not to protest but to pray because the day of deliverance is near.”

DIGEST
Staff and wire reports

Haitian boats still arriving

WASHINGTON — Coast Guard cutters intercepted more boats filled with Haitian refugees on Saturday, and guard officials said they were still awaiting instructions from the State Department.

The State Department is expected to announce soon what will happen to 1,148 Haitians put ashore at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or who are held aboard Coast Guard cutters.

The Haitians began an exodus on Oct. 29, a month after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forced from power by a military coup.

Eleven Cubans plucked from the ocean south of the Florida Keys were on their way to the United States on Saturday.
Aristide satisfied by Haiti embargo

NEW YORK - Deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide said yesterday that a trade embargo imposed by the Organization of American States should be enough to restore democracy in his troubled country. “Our main future is the embargo,” Aristide said at a news conference at Kennedy Airport. “It is not just a word, it’s a power, a nonviolent power.” Aristide, who was ousted in a military coup on Sept. 30, said he fully supported the embargo and hoped it would be enough to end the coup without foreign military intervention. (Reuters)

By Al Kamen
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Bush administration, fearing a new wave of Haitian refugees to Florida, yesterday began forcing more than 1,300 Haitians back to their troubled island republic—a move sharply denounced by lawmakers and human rights advocates as immoral and discriminatory.

Administration officials, after a week of internal debate, concluded that allowing fleeing Haitians to come to this country in the weeks following a coup against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide would prompt an uncontrollable flood of tens of thousands of Haitians to South Florida seeking to escape poverty.

The mounting wave of refugees, the department said, was overwhelming a State Department plan to have other countries in the region provide temporary safe haven in camps administered by the United Nations. Under a 1981 agreement with Haiti, the United States returns most Haitians intercepted at sea as economic migrants, not political refugees.

But the September overthrow of a democratic government, along with a U.S.-backed international economic blockade, caused the administration to temporarily suspend that policy.

The State Department announced yesterday’s decision as the Coast Guard cutter Confidence pulled into Port-au-Prince with about 220 refugees aboard. Another 1,100 refugees now crowded onto Coast Guard ships are expected to arrive in Port-au-Prince soon.

About 400 Haitians being held at the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are to be temporarily relocated to the U.N. centers in Honduras, Belize, Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago—the only

See HAITIANS
HAITIANS, cont

countries to respond to Washington's pleas for help. Fifty Haitians who appeared to qualify for asylum are being brought to the United States.

Shortly before the ship arrived, the U.N. high commissioner for refugees, Sadako Ogata, said through a spokesman that she hopes "all governments will avoid unilateral measures forcing asylum seekers back to Haiti."

Administration critics, both liberals and conservatives, reacted harshly. Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.) called the U.S. policy "totally unacceptable," "discriminatory" and "morally wrong," and said the Haitians should be granted refuge here. "To have a policy that says we are not going to accept Haitians when there is an illegal military government running Haiti is wrong, morally wrong," Mack said in an interview.

Mack, noting the U.S. policy of allowing Cuban refugees to enter the United States, said it was "the wrong signal for the U.S. to say if you come from one island you are accepted and another island you are rejected.... That is a discriminatory policy."

Cubans are given different treatment than other refugees because of a 1966 law that allows Cubans to become U.S. residents after a year here.

Rep. Charles B. Rangel (D-N.Y.) said that given the deteriorating political and economic conditions on Haiti, "to turn those people back is inhumane."

Arthur C. Helton of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights called the policy a "shameful solution" and said international law forbids the return of refugees to a place where they may be persecuted.

Helton said that while the United States had condemned a British decision two years ago to forcibly return Vietnamese refugees from Hong Kong, "this makes the Hong Kong procedures look ample by comparison."

The most recent Haitian exodus began as a trickle on Oct. 29, a month after the military coup. By Friday, 1,038 Haitians had been intercepted at sea. But the numbers jumped to nearly 1,800 during the weekend, and a State Department spokesman said a Voice of America radio appeal to Haitians to stay home did not appear to reduce the flow.

Yesterday's decision to force the Haitians back comes at a time when a U.S.-supported international embargo is causing conditions in the impoverished country to deteriorate further. Fuel shortages have cut electricity everywhere outside the capital. Cap Haitian, the second largest city, has been in a blackout for 23 consecutive nights and transportation has been severely crippled as nearly all gas stations have been closed.

The State Department said it hoped the return of the "boat people to Haiti will deter others from risking their lives by taking to sea in unseaworthy boats. We do not believe that those individuals returned to Haiti will be subjected to persecution there."

The refugees who were in Haiti yesterday were processed by five Red Cross officials in a green and white dockside gazebo built for tourist ships. Those ships stopped coming to Haiti in 1986.

There was a truckload of soldiers at the dock but no apparent intimidation and no reported incidents as the refugees, who ranged in age from five months to 66 years, disembarked.

The refugees said they sailed from the Haitian island of La Gonave on Thursday in a 40-foot sailboat that Coast Guard officials, who picked them up later that day, said was crowded and sinking in the Windward Passage.

"You can't get a good job in Haiti," said Joseph Merrulis, one of the boat people and a 35-year-old father of 10. "Everyone tries to go. We know we'll get caught but we'll go anyway."

Shalle Jerne, 29, who was traveling with two children, said she left three of her children behind but felt she had to leave because "there is nothing for me here." She said she was told by Coast Guard officials that they were taking her to Miami today. When she saw she was going back to Port-au-Prince, she said she thought "I will die." She drew her hand across her throat for emphasis.

Each refugee was given about $7, barely enough to pay the way home on increasingly rare buses. Red Cross worker Jean Michel Francis said the customary box of food given returnees was not available. "For now there is nothing else," he said.

Special correspondent Patrick Slavin in Port-au-Prince contributed to this report.

SEN. CONNIE MACK

... calls U.S. policy "discriminatory"
Haitian boat people forced to return home

Hundreds of Haitian boat people, who fled their homeland in the aftermath of a Sept. 30 coup, will be immediately returned to Haiti by the Coast Guard, the State Department said Monday. "In the absence of a sufficient safe-haven option, the Coast Guard has been directed to return most of the boat people to Haiti beginning on Monday," the State Department said.

Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., called the return of the Haitians "a racist and vicious policy... It has been anything but humane."

The number of Haitian refugees held by the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard has swelled to some 1,800. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said 483 Haitians were being held at Guantanamo, the U.S. naval base in Cuba, while about 1,300 were on Coast Guard ships at sea. Forty-nine were declared eligible to apply for political asylum in the United States and were flown to Miami.

The number has more than doubled in the past three days, spurred by worsening conditions after the ouster of democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the ensuing U.S.-supported embargo. — *Tom Squitieri*
Stop stalling about the Haitians

It's about time the United States government made a decision on what to do about the Haitians. These people have suffered enough both within their own country and during their numerous attempts to reach our shores. Don't keep them waiting. Make a decision.

And when that decision is made, it should be for the United States to accept at least a portion of those refugees currently being held by the U.S. Coast Guard out at sea. It's the only right thing to do.

The Coast Guard has stopped 15 boats full of more than 700 refugees since Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a Sept. 5 coup. Most refugees are being detained aboard Coast Guard ships awaiting a decision by the State Department on whether they will be admitted to the United States, returned to Haiti or sent to a third country.

On Wednesday, the government of Belize announced it will accept 100 of the refugees after the United States agreed to pay for the resettlement. Belize is the first nation to agree to take some of the refugees. For the past two weeks, the U.S. government has been working toward a regional solution to help resettle the Haitians. It's commendable that the U.S. paid Belize for the resettlement, but it's not enough.

House approves $291 billion military bill

WASHINGTON — The House yesterday approved a $291 billion military spending bill for 1992 that would spend $16 billion to recapitalize the armed forces, cut civilian employees and reduce the size of the military.

The Senate is expected late this week to approve the measure, which would limit spending on nuclear weapons programs and Bush's signature is likely to be welcomed on Wall Street.

The House approved the measure 399-82.

Congress is also expected late this week to approve a $1 billion military bill containing funds for the programs authorized under the measure.

The authorization represents a compromise between House and Senate versions, reached after the collapse of the Soviet union.

But it contains no substantial changes from priorities set earlier by Congress and the administration.

Rep. Les Aspin (D, Wisc.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said the measure "moves our defense closer to the new realities of the post-Cold War world.

One of the most controversial provisions would allow $4.5 billion for the Strategic Defense Initiative to build a limited defense against ballistic missiles. That is about a 29 percent jump in

For more than a decade, Haitians, like Cubans, have risked their lives crossing the ocean on patchwork vessels just to escape the wretched poverty in their homeland.

Because the Cubans are considered political refugees and because they are fleeing a communist country, they have received preferential treatment. This has infuriated Haitians who angrily point to the corruption, poverty and viciousness they survived under the Duvalier regime.

Nevertheless, Haitians are labeled illegal immigrants whereas Cubans are labeled refugees, largely due to the supposedly different reasons why they fled their countries and what can happen to them if they are returned. Technically, if Cubans are returned they will be jailed or even killed.

Technically, nothing happens to Haitians who are returned. Realistically, Cubans indeed face a very real danger if they are returned, but many Haitians have said the danger is equally potent for them.

Now that Aristide has been overthrown, the Haitian refugees have a strong case that they too, must be considered political refugees. In the interest of fairness, the United States has an obligation to take this case, and the plight of the Haitian people, seriously.

The Haitians have suffered long enough.
Over 650 Haitians rescued in choppy seas

During the past 24 hours, Coast Guard cutters have rescued over 650 Haitian migrants from unseaworthy vessels in worsening sea conditions off Haiti.

In a dramatic rescue, the cutter Northland, operating out of Portsmouth, Va., saved over 100 Haitians from their rapidly sinking vessel, which literally sank beneath their feet as the cutter arrived on scene. All of the migrants were safely taken aboard the cutter; no injuries were reported.

In another case, the cutter Confidence, which repatriated 224 Haitians in Port-Au-Prince yesterday, saved over 500 migrants from several overloaded vessels in the Windward Passage. All Haitians are being tended to aboard the cutter.

Meanwhile, 212 Haitians are aboard the 110-foot cutters Baranof and Padre, which are anchored in a sheltered lee northwest of the Windward Passage waiting for a larger cutter to take the Haitians aboard. Worsening weather conditions prohibit the cutters from getting underway with the amount of Haitians they have aboard.

Despite the increased numbers of Haitians, Coast Guard crews are continuing humanitarian efforts aboard the Coast Guard cutters. Food and water, medical attention and shelter are of primary importance. Every effort to meet the needs of the Haitian men, women and children is being made.

Every available vessel under the Seventh Coast Guard District's control has been dispatched to the Windward Passage to assist in the rescue effort. Due to the sudden increase in migrants, the Seventh Coast Guard District has requested additional vessel support from Coast Guard Atlantic Area command in New York.

The Coast Guard's main concern is the safety of the Haitians, most of whom leave Haiti on grossly overloaded and underequipped vessels. The worsening weather conditions only add to the serious danger.

"Entering our third century of service"
Federal judge stops return of Haitians

MIAMI (UPI) - U.S. District Judge Donald Graham issued a temporary restraining order Tuesday that prevents the federal government from sending Haitian refugees back to their homeland.

The restraining order was issued after an emergency hearing requested by the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami.

The center's lawsuit filed Tuesday contends the government order to repatriate the Haitians forcibly violates U.S. refugee laws that forbid deporting people who face political persecution in their home country.

"Basically our argument is they (Haitians) are not being fairly interviewed (by the Immigration and Naturalization Service) on their reasons for fleeing Haiti," said center attorney Cheryl Little. "We believe these are political refugees and had INS properly interviewed them and identified them as potential refugees we would then be offering them legal representation and assisting them with their political asylum claims."

Denise Hunter, a spokeswoman for Graham, said the first issue to be resolved is whether the Haitian Refugee Center has the legal standing to present the challenge to the deportation.

Hunter said the government and the plaintiffs agreed it was an emergency situation, and the court said the immediate issues of Haitian rights under U.S. law would be moot unless immediate relief from the deportation order was given.

Hunter said the plaintiffs have five days to respond to the question of standing and then the government has two days in which to respond.

Graham agreed to hear the Haitian issue, which is usually assigned to federal Judge Clyde Atkins, who will hear all future arguments in the pending lawsuit. Atkins was out of town Tuesday.

The Bush administration on Monday ordered the Coast Guard to return most of the Haitian boat people immediately to the homeland they fled following a coup Sept. 30 that ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Judge Graham's restraining order came too late for many Haitians who had risked their lives by fleeing on makeshift boats.

The State Department said the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Confidence returned 224 people to Haiti on Monday and 314 refugees were sent back Tuesday by the Coast Guard vessel Dallas.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher in Washington said the total number of Haitian boat people picked up by U.S. Coast Guard vessels stood at 2,160.

"Fifty-three boat people were flown to Miami yesterday after having been interviewed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and found to have a plausible claim of asylum," he said.

Venezuela, Honduras, Belize and Trinidad and Tobago have offered to take between 100 and 250 Haitians each, but to date, no Haitians had been transferred to those countries, Boucher said.

The refugees were in U.S. custody on Coast Guard vessels and at the Guantanamo U.S. Naval Base in Cuba.

The Coast Guard said it intercepted four overloaded vessels carrying 386 Haitian refugees in international waters Monday and Tuesday. The refugees were put aboard Coast Guard cutters.

The State Department had feared that bringing into the United States a large number of Haitians who did not have a claim to asylum would encourage a massive outflow from Haiti, which would result on a large number of deaths of the high seas.