

Haitian migrant workers in a bateye in the Dominican Republic

Photo by Leah Gordon

Unwelcome, unwanted

When a boat carrying some 400 Haitians ran aground just two miles off the Florida coast on New Year's Day, the British media had its first Haiti headline story for several years. Haitian 'boat-people' is an old chestnut that is easy to roast and serve up on an otherwise slow news day. As in the old millennium, so in the new, and the US Coast Guard returned the Haitians to their homeland without interviewing them to evaluate their asylum claims. In doing so, the US once again flagrantly contravened international refugee law. The fact that, meanwhile, a six-year old Cuban boy found drifting at sea was allowed to stay in Florida while the anti-Castro Cuban community attempted a legalised kidnap, only rubbed salt into the wounds of the returned Haitians. (*see Carl Hiaasen overleaf*)

With the escape route to the US barred, the neighbouring Dominican Republic is often the only other option for Haitians looking for way to find a living. Since the early decades of the last century, Haitians have worked in the Dominican Republic doing the back-breaking work of harvesting sugar cane. Under the Duvaliers, each year thousands of Haitians were assembled and sold like cattle to the Dominican sugar industry. Usually these workers were sent back once the harvest was over, but thousands stayed on, living permanently in squalid shanties called *bateyes* in the centre of the plantations. More recently, Haitians have crossed over the long border to provide cheap labour for the Dominican construction and tourism sectors.

There are estimated to be over half a million people in the Dominican Republic (DR) who were born in Haiti, or who were born in the

DR to Haitian parents or grandparents. Over the years, right wing regimes in the DR have encouraged anti-Haitian racism as a tool to manipulate and divide the population, and periodically the DR security forces are deployed to round-up, and deport to Haiti, black people who cannot instantly prove Dominican citizenship.

In November 1999, Dominican soldiers and police forcibly deported as many as 12,000 people in the space of a few weeks. In a familiar pattern, people assumed to be Haitian were picked up on the street, bundled into trucks and driven to the nearest border post where they were dumped on the Haitian side. Many people were separated from their families, and were deported without money, clothes or official papers.

The wave of deportations subsided towards the end of the month when Santo Domingo hosted a meeting of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific group of countries, but, according to reports, the anti-Haitian drive resumed soon after. At the beginning of January, the director of the Haitian Migration Office announced that around 600 Haitians were being repatriated each day as the Dominican border police intercepted Haitians who had crossed back in to Haiti to celebrate Christmas and the New Year with their families, and were detained as they attempted to cross back into the Dominican Republic.

One explanation for the current deportations is the forthcoming Dominican election, and the attempt by the the supporters of right wing former president Joaquin Balaguer to stoke the fire of racial antagonism for political purposes. However, there may be more to

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⇒ these events than at first meets the eye, and some commentators have suggested that the root cause of the deportations is the recent privatisation of the Dominican State sugar company. It may be that the new owners want to clear the plantation bateyes of older men, women and children to make room for younger and more productive male workers.

The cruel irony is that Haitian labour has played a very significant role in the development of the Dominican economy which, in comparison with Haiti's, is positively booming. First, the sugar industry, and then tourism, were built on the backs of Haitian labour. But now, Dominican business interests and their political representatives, having achieved economic success, appear to want to control the flow of people, using strong-arm tactics to finesse the labour force and control the pace of immigration. At the same time as they try to restrict the border traffic in people, they are reaping the profits from the free flow of goods, thanks to the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programme in Haiti that brought about the scrapping of import tariffs. Since then, Dominican goods have poured into Haiti, often overwhelming local production, and, in the year 1998-99, the buoyant DR economy was in a position to double the value of its exports to its poor neighbour. ■

Boats leaving La Tortue island, northern Haiti



Photo by Leah Gordon

Writing in The Miami Herald, Carl Hiaasen, the author of the novels, *Tourist Season*, *Double Whammy* and *Strip Tease*, considered the contrasting fates of would-be Haitian and Cuban immigrants to the USA:

"A Cuban baseball player escapes by boat to the Bahamas, and is welcomed into the United States on a humanitarian visa. Within months he's a millionaire, pitching for the New York Yankees. No humanitarian visas were given to the Haitians taken off that creaky boat in Biscayne Bay and sent home. We'll never know if any of them could throw a 95 mph fastball, like 'El Duque' Hernandez,

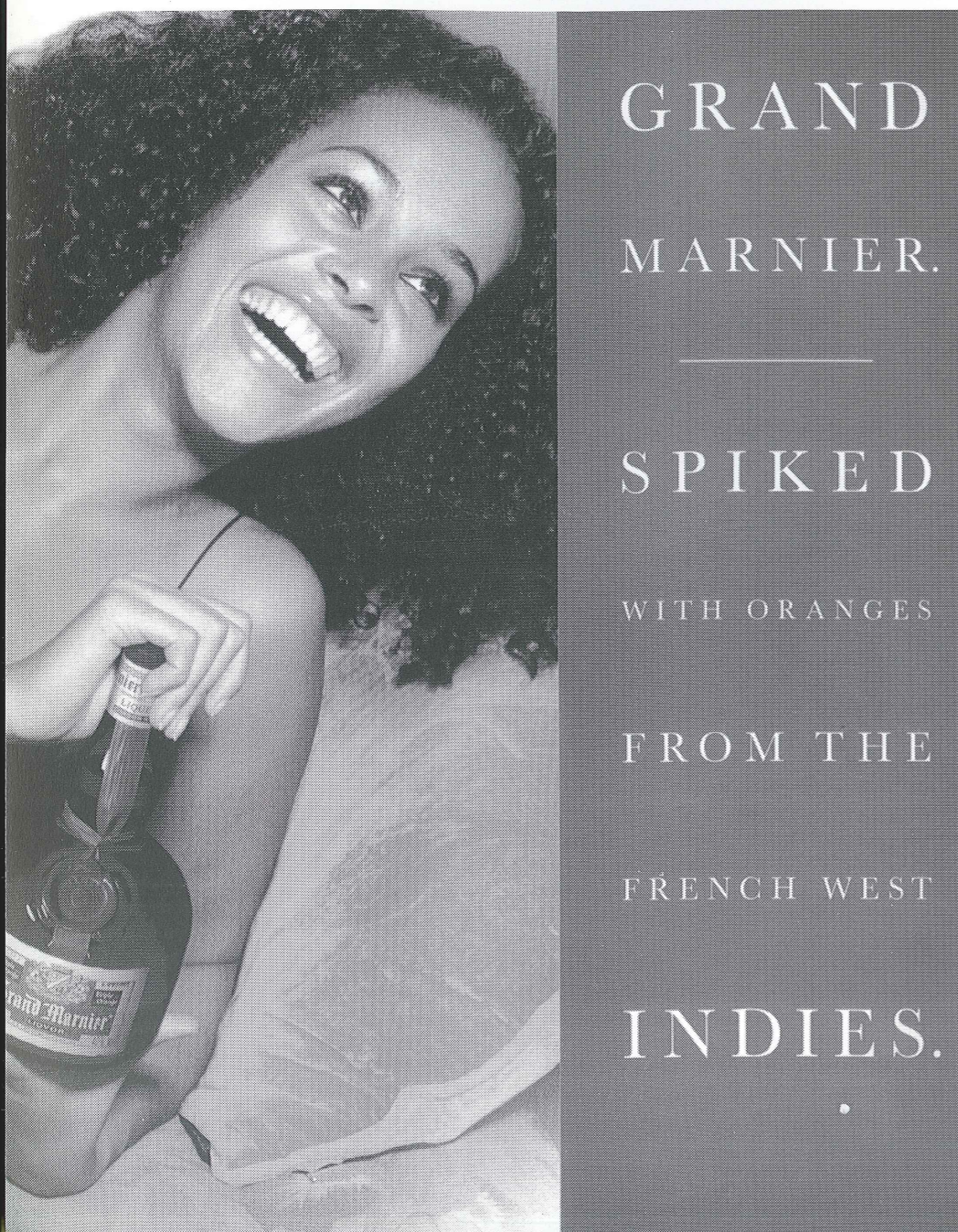
but they came here chasing the same dream of prosperity.

Seldom has the disparity been as dramatically illustrated as in recent weeks. Ever since Thanksgiving, the disgraceful tug-of-war over little Elian Gonzalez has obsessed the local media. Plucked from an inner tube off the Broward coast, the Cuban boy who lost his mother on the voyage has become a political pawn here and in Havana. If Elian had come from any other country, including Haiti, he would have been flown home to his father within days of his rescue. Instead he's being promoted like a child movie star, hauled from one contrived appearance to

another.

Amid this ongoing P.R. campaign comes the untimely beaching of the Haitian migrants, and the distressing images of 400-plus men, women and children squeezed onto a teetering wooden hulk. They undertook their dangerous journey for the same reason Elian's mother had made hers: They wanted a better life. And, like Elian's mother, most of them were not political refugees as defined by U.S. law. Yet the Haitians were sent back..."

Extracted from "U.S. immigration policy is inconsistent", The Miami Herald, 5 January 2000. ■



Bitter oranges

- the Grand Marnier workers of Haiti

"A bottle of Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge is sold every two seconds...", boasts the Marnier-Lapostelle company web site. "Spiked with oranges from the French West Indies", runs the advertising slogan on the poster. For the 1999-2000 advertising campaign, there is a photograph showing a woman clutching a bottle of the famous cognac-based orange liqueur, and a caption that reads, "Ever tried it in the afternoon."

The French drinks company, Marnier-Lapostelle, recorded a net income of around £10 million in 1998 - a huge amount that makes the plight of the Haitian workers who produce the orange peel for export to France, all the more outrageous.

On a 72-hectare plantation, run by the local Haitian firm, Novella Entreprises, on behalf of Marnier-Lapostelle, day-labourers work in the orange groves, planting trees and keeping irrigation channels clear. Other workers pick, peel and grate the oranges, to produce the dried peel that is shipped to France where it is added to brandy to create the distinctive Grand Marnier taste.

Pitiful pay and conditions

According to Batay Ouvriye, a Haitian organisation that defends workers' interests, the workers on the Marnier-Lapostelle plantation

are paid a pittance - the day labourers are paid just 52 gourdes (a little less than US\$3) a day, while the orange pickers are paid on the basis of how many cases they fill per day, and must work flat out for sometimes a 12 hour day if they are to fill enough to earn anything approaching a living wage. The same is true for those who peel and grate the rind - they are paid approximately US\$1 for each case of oranges they can complete in a day, perhaps two or three.

The plantation lacks even the most basic toilet or washing facilities, creating special problems for the orange peelers and graters who often cut their hands and suffer painful irritation when the citric acid juice gets into their wounds. Constant exposure to the acidic spray also causes respiratory and digestive problems. None of the workers can claim the sick leave nor the annual holidays that are specified by Haitian labour law.

Workers unionise

In August 1999, the plantation workers formed a union, registered with the Haitian Ministry of Social Affairs, in order to take up their grievances with Novella's Daniel Zephir, who manages the plantation on behalf of Marnier-Lapostelle. Initially some progress appeared to be made when Zephir agreed to implement some improvements in conditions in time for next summer's harvest. However, he was less

forthcoming when the issue of wage increases was raised, claiming that Marnier-Lapostelle in Paris decided the salary costs.

The Union of Marnier-Lapostelle Workers then made contact with one of the French company's technicians when he visited the plantation, and gave him a letter for the company bosses in which they appealed for some movement on wages. Since then, relations between Zephir and the union have deteriorated, with union members being victimised and intimidated by the directors and supervisors.

At the end of December, after five sets of talks, the union decided to break off negotiations. Zephir had made what the workers regarded as derisory wage increases. All he offered was just a few cents more for each box of oranges - an increase way below the current rate of inflation in Haiti. He had also proposed that the orange pickers, who at present work in pairs and are both paid the going rate for the number of boxes picked, should in future work alone yet continue to be paid by the box at close to the existing rate!

Solidarity appeal

At the beginning of December 1999, Batay Ouvriye publicised an appeal made by the union for letters of support to be sent to Daniel Zephir and the Marnier-Lapostelle management in Paris. The union asked that Marnier-Lapostelle intervene with Zephir to authorise a proper wage increase. The Haiti Support Group forwarded the appeal to various email networks, and many individuals and organisations, including two South African trade unions, wrote letters. However, the Marnier-Lapostelle management has not so far issued any comment or sent any replies.

In January, the union released a second appeal for international solidarity in the form of letters to the management. The union is not calling for a boycott, or even threatening a boycott of Marnier products, but hopes that the French company will feel the negative publicity is more costly than a meagre pay increase for the Haitian workers. For details contact the Haiti Support Group <haitisupport@gn.apc.org> ■

"The conditions resemble those of the slave plantation era"

Union of Marnier-Lapostelle Workers solidarity appeal

YEAR 2000 CELEBRATIONS IN HAITI

In Haiti, celebrations for the beginning of a new year traditionally take place on 6th January - The Day of Kings. This is an occasion for celebration in particular in the homes of Christians, and of Vodouists who organise the "manje lwa" (a reception in honour of the Vodou spirits), and the "beny" sessions (leaf baths) to give protection to the faithful.

This year, the evening of 6th January saw a big event take place at the Place Nations Unies (an area in downtown Port-au-Prince) which has now become the number one location for open air events. The roots group, Rasin Mapou, led by the drummer and singer, Azor, played, and their rhythms and harmonies put the crowd into a trance. There was also a performance by the guitar trio, Strings.

Earlier, for the end of the millenium celebrations on 31st December, thousands of Haitians flocked to public spaces, particularly the renovated Place Nations Unies and Place Dessalines in the centre of the Champs de Mars. Meanwhile, a small minority of people paid huge prices to celebrate New Year's Eve with parties and dinners at Port-au-Prince's big hotels and night-clubs.

At Place Dessalines, DJs played records, and there was an exhibition of the work of dozens of painters. To welcome the new millenium, the Champ de Mars was decked out with twinkling lights of all colours. At the same time, a puppet show entertained thousands of people, most of them children, at the Place Nations Unies, near the port. On the stroke of midnight, fireworks lit up the sky over the port area, the neighbourhood of Bel Air, the Champ de Mars, and Place St. Pierre in Petionville.

Catholics and Vodouists marked the new millenium in particular ways. Thousands of believers gathered in the Sylvio Cator football stadium to pray and sing together with

New address for the HSG

As some of you will have noticed, the Haiti Support Group has moved after many years at Trinity Church in Golders Green, north London. More and more we are finding it convenient to operate by use of email, and we shall shortly announce details of our web site.

If you have email please contact us on haitisupport@gn.apc.org. Otherwise, correspondence should be sent to the **Haiti Support Group at PO Box 29623, London E9 7XU**. Telephone and fax messages can be left on 020 8525 0456.

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Vodouists organised a candlelight procession through the streets of the capital during the night of the 31st December

Catholic orchestras and in the presence of the Church hierarchy. The Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, Monsignor Serge Miot, hoped that peace would reign in Haiti in the coming year. For their part, Vodouists organised a candlelight procession through the streets of the capital during the night of the 31st December.

Throughout the celebrations, there was a

strong police presence, with many patrol units ready to intervene if necessary. At times even President Préval in person lent his assistance to the traffic police as they carried spot-checks at road-blocks. No acts of robbery and crime were reported.

As always in Haiti, the New Year celebrations coincided with the Independence Day holiday on 1st January...An official ceremony was organised in Gonaïves where Independence was proclaimed in 1804. During the course of the ceremony, President Préval again called on the international community to cancel Haiti's debt. He criticised the creditors who had remained deaf to this same appeal that he had made the year before.

In addition, Préval declared the year 2000, the 'year of the peasants'. The President promised to work to provide peasants with access to education and health. He also mentioned the continuation of his programme to improve road infrastructure across the country, and the bringing back into service of certain factories to process agricultural products.

Independence Day was brought to a conclusion by a port-side event coordinated by the singer, Sweet Mickey, who brought together musicians from a variety of styles to entertain an enormous crowd.

As for the Y2K 'bug' - nothing was heard. The banking and telephone systems worked perfectly normally. According to one source, around \$3 million was spent by the State to make sure all systems could cope with the 'bug'.

■ **Source: CRAD Information Service, written by Gotson Pierre, translated from French by Charles Arthur**

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Allons en Haïti

A new activity pack for students of French at stages 3 and 4 has been produced by ActionAid. Pupils aged 11-16 studying French can use it to explore life in a country in the developing world and develop their language skills.

The first part of the pack contains information on the history, politics and economy of Haiti. This begins with a information section in English for the teacher. The pack imparts facts about Haiti clearly and simply, whilst at the same time testing and stretching the students' French abilities. The second part of the pack concentrates on the stories and lives of

individuals living in the Far West region of Haiti where ActionAid runs a project. Using this section, students practice French, learn about another culture, and have a deeper understanding of the work of aid agencies in countries like Haiti.

The pack is laid out cleanly and full of beautiful photographs - certainly an excellent and clever way of educating

UK students about the lives and needs of Haitians. *Allons en Haïti* costs £15 plus 15% post and packing, and is available from: ActionAid Education, Chataway House, Leach House, Chard, Somerset TA20 1FR.

● Tel 01460 23 8061
● Fax 01460 67 191
● Email
deved@actionaid.org.uk

Chans Alternativ library

In the November issue of *Haiti Briefing*, we reported on the English book lending-library run by Chans Alternativ, the Haitian organisation working to help integrate people deported to Haiti from the US. Any books of general interest that can be donated to this worthy cause should be sent to the Haiti Support Group at our new address.