

Haitians die when boat overturns

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SOUTH DOCK, Turks and Caicos Islands --

Every year, Haitians by the hundreds set off in rickety boats hoping to escape poverty by sneaking into the U.S. The perils became gruesomely apparent Friday when a crowded boat capsized, flinging migrants into shark-infested waters.

Hours after the sailing vessel overturned in moonlit waters a half-mile from shore, rescuers had recovered more than a dozen bodies - some with savage bite wounds - and were searching for about 60 missing people.

The Turks and Caicos government said the boat was carrying some 160 people and that 78 survivors - 69 males and 9 females - were rescued. Police have recovered 16 bodies, those of 13 females and three males, the government said.

Some survivors were spotted by a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter clinging to the hull of their overturned vessel, said Petty Officer Third Class Barry Bena. The chopper guided in a boat to get them. A Coast Guard cutter and a C-130 plane also were dispatched to join the search.

The Coast Guard said its helicopter reported spotting about 20 corpses. An AP reporter saw about a dozen bodies, some with missing feet and limbs.

Speaking through an interpreter, one of the survivors said the migrants were on a two-day journey from the northern Haitian town of Cap-Haitien to the Turks and Caicos when the overloaded boat was rocked by choppy waters off the coast.

Some passengers panicked as lightning crackled overhead and caused the vessel to capsize, Wilke Pierre, 52, said.

"I lost one of my two daughters that made the trip with me. I wanted to save her but I could not because everyone was excited and was screaming," Pierre told The Associated Press.

It could become the worst disaster in years to hit Haitian migrants, who jam into boats to attempt the treacherous journey. The boat that overturned Friday was only about 25 feet long.

"When it's done that way it takes almost nothing for a disaster to occur," Bena said in a telephone interview from Miami. "A strong wind or a sea swell or people moving around can capsize a boat in an instant."

The Coast Guard said the migrant vessel capsized while being towed by a Turks and Caicos police boat at 4:30 a.m., but local authorities said the police boat arrived on the scene only after the accident.

Minister of Home Affairs Galmo Williams said he was awaiting a full report from the Turks and Caicos police.

Health Minister Lillian Boyce, meanwhile, called on human trafficking rings to stop imperiling lives. "I am asking all of you in the Turks and Caicos who are part of this illegal activity to please stop. Put an end to it," Boyce said.

Survivors were taken to a detention center on Providenciales, the island that is the urban center of the Turks and Caicos and features an 18-hole golf course, resort hotels, bars and restaurants, and will be sent back to Haiti. The submerged boat was later towed to shore.

There is a sizable community of illegal Haitian immigrants on Providenciales, and it was not immediately clear if those aboard the boat were headed here or to the United States - the more common destination.

The number of Haitians intercepted by the Coast Guard has increased recently, despite the restoration of democracy to Haiti last year with the election of President Rene Preval. Preval replaced an interim government that took over after a bloody rebellion overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004.

Preval, who is hugely popular among Haiti's poor, has used the help of U.N. peacekeepers to crack down on gangs that were behind a kidnapping epidemic in the capital and is seeking foreign investment to help boost the economy. But the numbers of Haitians trying to reach the U.S. show that many people can't wait while he tries to transform the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

This year, the Coast Guard has intercepted 909 Haitians, compared to 769 during all of 2006 and 1,828 in 2005. During the turbulent year of the 2004 rebellion, 3,078 were caught.

Jean-Robert Lafortune, chairman of the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition in Florida, said Haiti's economic struggles and its political instability are too much for many people.

He said Friday's tragedy underscored "one of the greatest fears that we always have in the community - knowing that many of those refugees do not make it in their attempt to make the Florida shore."