

# Search suspended in Haiti boat disaster

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OUTH DOCK, Turks and Caicos Islands --

The U.S. Coast Guard suspended its search Saturday for more than 40 missing Haitian migrants after local authorities said it was no longer needed as hopes faded of finding more survivors.

Several boats and helicopters belonging to the Turks and Caicos, near where the boat sank Friday, continued to search the Caribbean waters. But police Inspector Sharon Whitaker said Turks and Caicos officials may also suspend their search early Sunday if no more survivors or bodies are found.

Roughly 160 Haitian migrants were packed aboard a 25-foot boat when it ran into stormy weather before dawn Friday off the coast of this British territory. Thirty six people - 23 women and 13 men - were confirmed dead in addition to the more than 40 missing.

Searchers found no survivors or bodies on Saturday, dimming hopes for the rescue effort.

U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Barry Bena told The Associated Press on Saturday that Turks and Caicos authorities asked the U.S. Coast Guard to suspend its search, "apparently because they believed the likelihood of finding more survivors was very slim."

But Turks and Caicos Premier Michael Misick said his government would "use all the resources at our disposal to ensure that all bodies are recovered."

A survivor said the migrant ship sank after passengers panicked and shifted to one side, overturning the vessel and spilling most of the passengers into the shark-infested waters.

But Turks and Caicos police initially notified the U.S. Coast Guard early Friday that the Haitian sloop capsized while a police boat was towing the intercepted vessel to shore, according to Bena.

It was not immediately possible to reconcile the differing accounts of the sinking.

Three British investigators will conduct interviews with "all concerned including the 78 survivors," according to Misick's statement. The islands are largely self-governing but defer to Britain in issues of defense, security and foreign affairs.

Duncan said the death toll rose to at least 36 when authorities found four bodies in the hold of the capsized sloop after it was towed back to port on the territory's main island of Providenciales, about 120 miles north of Haiti.

Every year, hundreds of Haitians set off in rickety boats, fleeing economic and civil disorder in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation in hopes of finding a better life by sneaking into the United States or Caribbean islands such as the Turks and Caicos.

So far this year the U.S. Coast Guard has intercepted 909 Haitians, compared to 769 during all of 2006 and 1,828 in 2005. During turbulent 2004, 3,078 were interdicted.