

A failed country on America's doorstep

OUR OPINION: DESPERATION AT SEA A SIGN THAT HAITI NEEDS A LIFELINE

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The recent surge of Haitians taking to the seas to flee their destitute country resulted last week in a terrible calamity -- a capsized sailboat and 61 souls lost, some of them chopped up by sharks. Then came even-worse stories from survivors, alleging a crime of indescribable inhumanity. Survivors said that a Turks and Caicos patrol boat had rammed their sailboat, towed it into deeper water and abandoned all aboard the crippled vessel to the sea and sharks. Several investigations are under way by local authorities and the British government. What is needed, though, is a thorough, independent investigation by a disinterested party such as the Organization of American States.

This sickening, gut-wrenching tragedy has caused many caring Americans to ask perplexing questions about why such things continue to happen and what, if anything, can be done to prevent them from recurring. The answers aren't simple or easy, but this much is clear: The more that the United States and the international community can do to stabilize Haiti's politics and help to rebuild its shattered economy, the less likely it would be that desperate people will cast their fate and lives to the sea.

In a community that routinely welcomes Cubans who flee Fidel Castro's unbending treachery, the difference in how U.S. immigration policy treats Haitian and Cuban migrants increasingly is becoming a sore point. The reality, however, is that U.S. policy is different for Haitians. When they are interdicted, for example, Haitians have virtually no chance to make a claim for political asylum. If a Haitian interdicted at sea doesn't aggressively demand or shout asylum, he will be sent back. Last year, 1,198 Haitians were interdicted but not one of them was granted asylum.

More Haitians are leaving the island this year because conditions have deteriorated so badly. In April, the U.S. Coast Guard interdicted 704 Haitians, nearly as many as were intercepted all of last year. The last big surge came in 2004 when Haiti was beset with political turmoil that led to former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide resigning and leaving the country.

Political scars from those days haven't healed. In many respects, life for most people has gotten worse. Killer storms have left thousands homeless; kidnappings and gang violence are a scourge in the cities; and riots and pillage from years of upheaval have wrecked the economy.

Haiti needs basic infrastructure such as sewers, roads and electric power; and it needs improved public services for courts, police, healthcare and education. Most of all, though, Haitians need jobs.

On Thursday, Haitian President Rene Preval met with members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and later with Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. Mr. Preval asked for U.S. help in catching human smugglers and in fighting corruption. Mostly, though, he asked for economic help. One thing that Congress can do to bring quick help is to fund and implement an initiative that would allow Haiti to export some textiles to the United States duty-free. Rep. Kendrick Meek asked for support of the initiative in letters to international banks, the OAS and Congressional leaders. Rep. Ros-Lehtinen said she will ask President Bush to support the effort. Through such initiatives, Haiti can begin the long journey to economic well-being.