

Haitians cross Dominican border to escape the misery of dire poverty

OUANAMINTHE, Haiti – During the afternoons before market days, strangers begin showing up in town. Twice a week, like clockwork.

They congregate in small groups in the city park, at taxi stops, on street corners. They eye the streets, looking for ways to blend in. But the residents of Ouanaminthe know well what these newcomers are plotting. Some local residents may even join them.

These strangers – fellow Haitians – have one goal: entering the Dominican Republic in a bid to escape the dire poverty that engulfs Haiti. Faced with 70 percent unemployment and corresponding severe human needs, Haitians constantly make their way to the border town of Ouanaminthe seeking the promise of a better life.

Their plan is to join the throng of Haitians who will cross the border unimpeded into Dajabon the next morning as they head for the twice-weekly market just beyond the arch that welcomes visitors to the Dominican border town.

The market is where Haitians and Dominicans buy and sell goods each Monday and Friday. The atmosphere during the hours before the 9 a.m. border opening is frenzied as thousands gather at the most vital commercial exchange center on the Haitian-Dominican frontier. Men pulling weather-worn wooden carts and kids pushing wheelbarrows compete with panel trucks, buses and motor scooters belching acrid diesel fumes for position at the foot of the bridge that will carry them over the Massacre River into Dajabon.

It's an easy place for Haitians to cross unnoticed into a country where the government works and life is not nearly as harsh.

Alejandro Robles, director of the Labor Rights Center, a program of Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Services in Dajabon, said that by afternoon on market days Haitians will have begun to disperse, some on buses that will take them into the interior of the Dominican Republic and others on foot to the nearby fertile farms.

The border crossing at Ouanaminthe-Dajabon is the farthest north and the busiest of the three official entry points shared by the two countries. But there are 88 points along the 193-mile border where “buscon” – smugglers – take people across secretly for a fee, explained Leonard Jean, an attorney with the Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Services’ Jano Sikse Border Network in Ouanaminthe.

“They promise the people they will have a better life when they get there,” Jean said.

The network welcomes Haitians who have been deported by the Dominican government. It works in conjunction with a similar welcoming center for women run by the Sisters of St. John the Evangelist across town.

Between May 1 and July 31, the network and the Catholic aid agency Caritas Haiti assisted 1,334 repatriated Haitians who had been taken into custody by Dominican authorities in raids on worksites and “bateyes,” communities of makeshift houses or barracks built for Haitian workers.

“The men, when they return, they are in really bad shape,” Jean said. “They do hard labor in the Dominican Republic so they return in bad shape.”

Most often, Haitian men land jobs in the Dominican Republic in construction or as farm laborers, harvesting rice, melons, corn, tomatoes or sugar cane. They may earn as much as 4,000 Dominican pesos, about \$115, a month. In contrast, Haiti’s per capita income is about \$33 per month.

Women also work in the fields, but are more likely to sell prepared food in the bateyes or end up working as domestic help.

Robles said as many as 2 million undocumented Haitians live in the Dominican Republic. Even though a few thousand are returned annually – the government keeps no exact count – the chance of any particular Haitian being rounded up is slim.

In late October, the tide of Haitians being returned slowed to a trickle. Jean attributed the slowdown to the violent killing Oct. 20 of four Haitians who were discovered in the Dominican countryside illegally cutting and burning trees to make charcoal, a widely used commodity back home. Details surrounding the murders

were sketchy. Robles' program has demanded the government investigate.

The furor that erupted over the deaths illustrates the long-standing conflicts that exist between Haitians and Dominicans over migration.

Haitians believe the killings are indicative of the deep hatred Dominicans feel toward them. Some Dominican news reports focused on the environmental damage the Haitians were causing, seeming to imply the deaths were justified.

Bishop Chibly Langlois of Fort-Liberte, Haiti, said in an Oct. 24 interview that he believed some Dominicans harbor deep-seated discrimination against Haitians and readily violate Dominican laws governing the rights of workers, documented or undocumented.

"Once (Haitians) cross over there they are in a country where they are not welcome and the government is not looking forward to helping," the bishop said.

Many Dominicans, meanwhile, believe that Haitians take much-needed jobs from poor Dominicans. As a rule, several advocates for Haitian workers told Catholic News Service, Haitians often work at jobs most Dominicans shun, and they get paid less than Dominicans for the same work.

Claudette Joseph went to the Dominican Republic twice - in 1991 and 1994 - and both times was deported by immigration authorities. Now living in a village built in 2001 by the European Union for repatriated Haitians near Ouanaminthe, Joseph said landowners often would renege on paying her to harvest corn and sugar cane.

"They don't like our skin color, dark," Joseph said.

The Labor Rights Center, supported by the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services, has undertaken an effort to protect worker rights and ultimately ease tensions among the two peoples. A team of advocates regularly conducts workshops to help workers understand their rights under Dominican law.

Jhonny Rivas, a former farm laborer who is now the center's lead organizer, said all workers, including undocumented Haitians, are governed by labor laws covering the length of the workweek, overtime pay and working conditions.

He became an organizer in 2007 after being fired because he turned down an offer to become a field foreman.

“Because I was a worker, I saw the way they abused the workers on the farms,” the slightly built Dominican said. “I don’t want to be a boss to the Haitians.”

Rivas, 29, acknowledged that he has received threats from farm supervisors, who consider him a “troublemaker and instigator.” In June, a police officer shot Rivas when he came to the aid of a Haitian worker being roughed up by the officer. Rivas subsequently was jailed after being treated at a local hospital, but was released the next day after a local Jesuit priest voluntarily joined him in jail, vowing to stay until the young organizer was let go.

Since the incident local Dominican authorities have offered to protect Rivas on his rounds in the fields.

“They have more respect for Jhonny,” Robles said.

Even with such small victories, vastly improved relations between Haitians and Dominicans are a long way off, according to labor rights advocates on both sides of the border. As long as wide discrepancies in the standards of living between the two countries exist, the prospect that Haitians will simply stop crossing the border is nil, they said.

“We do work on prevention,” explained Jesuit Father Kenel Senatus, who works with the Jano Sikse Border Network. “But these people will not always come to us. They want to go (across).”

CNS staff writer Dennis Sadowski traveled to Haiti and the Dominican Republic in October with other winners of Catholic Relief Services’ Egan Award for Journalistic Excellence.