

UNDOCUMENTED HAITIANS

We can't send them back

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In 1966 President Lyndon B. Johnson took an historic step forward when he began flights from Cuba to the United States to prevent physical harm to people leaving that country by unsafe boats. By the time these flights ended, 265,000 men, women and children had flown to the United States, mostly aboard commercial airliners, coordinated by the federal government. In response to the Camarioca boatlift, the president seized the high ground and in a humane and compassionate act pledged the resources of the United States in the name of humanity.

Congress responded as well and passed the Cuban Refugee Adjustment Act that allowed Cubans who were flown into the United States, as well as Cubans who had already arrived here through other means, to become lawful permanent residents of the United States.

Temporary shelter

In 1990, Congress had a similar humane response to people suffering from "armed conflict" or "an earthquake, flood, drought, epidemic or other environmental disaster" within their country.

We committed ourselves as a nation to give those people temporary shelter in 18-month increments until the

disaster ended. Congress called it Temporary Protected Status (TPS). When Hurricane Mitch swept through Central America, the government granted TPS in 1999 to Hondurans, Nicaraguans and Salvadorans. When Montserrat's volcano erupted, we granted TPS in 1997 to citizens of that country. In fact, we have had scores of TPS programs from countries as diverse as Liberia and Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia and Burundi and Sudan.

Wednesday, the Obama administration could not summon the moral courage to do the same for Haitians facing a disaster far worse than have virtually all previous beneficiaries of TPS. It declined to grant TPS despite repeated pleas from human-rights organizations. Haiti has been hit by earthquakes, hurricanes and other environmental disasters and armed conflict that certainly qualify it for TPS under any conceivable understanding of those terms.

The administration has also been silent on any plans to bring Haitians to the United States in a manner similar to the flights from Cuba.

Tens of thousands of people have already died in Haiti and more will die from lack of medical care, water, food and other basic necessities. Surely if we can fly people out of Cuba for political rea-

sons, we can fly people out of Haiti who are facing death.

Although we have admirably sent assistance to Haiti, the policy is eerily silent about helping Haitians here or helping to bring Haitians to the United States. The president has said that the next few days and weeks are critical, but the underlying message could not be clearer: We do not want Haitians in the United States. This is not a new policy; but one, surprisingly, coming from an administration that has sought to reintroduce notions of justice and morality to international discourse.

We can do better.

Grant TPS

We can be the moral leader we were when President Johnson summoned the courage to bring Cubans to these shores in 1966 and Congress granted them residency. This administration should not be sending Haitians in harm's way back to Haiti and should therefore announce unequivocally that it will grant TPS. It should also take people who are in harm's way out of Haiti when it is necessary to prevent their deaths.

Isn't that what a moral nation would do?

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