

UNITED STATES SPONSORS WAIT FOR UNACCOMPANIED HAITIAN CHILDREN

HON. CARRIE P. MEEK

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, May 1, 1995

Mrs. MEEK of Florida. Mr. Speaker, few things are as traumatic for a child as being abandoned. However, for the past 9 months, 249 unaccompanied Haitian children have been detained in a hot, dusty refugee camp at the United States Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The plight of these children demands the attention of every American.

I want to share with my colleagues an article that appeared in this morning's New York Times which describes the plight of these unfortunate, minor children, who have waited for months—and possibly will have to wait several more months—while the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees tries to find homes for them in Haiti.

This article details the harsh, impermanent life that these children face in the camp, despite the best efforts of dedicated U.S. military personnel to help make the best of a bad situation. I urge all my colleagues to read this article.

The United States would not tolerate such treatment for our children. In fact, the United States does not treat Cuban children at Guantanamo in this manner. The time has come for the United States to end this kind of treatment to Haitian children at Guantanamo, too.

At Guantanamo, these children are alone, vulnerable and depressed. However, many of these children have relatives living in the United States who are ready and willing to care for them. Religious and community groups in Miami have volunteered to provide whatever resources are necessary to insure that no child would become a public charge and that each would be fully supported.

Mr. Speaker, children belong in homes, not camps. The time has come to close this camp and insure these children a decent place in which to live where they are wanted, loved, nurtured and properly cared for. The Justice Department needs to change its policies to make this possible.

[From the New York Times, May 1, 1995]

MANY HAITIAN CHILDREN VIEW CAMP'S LIMBO AS PERMANENT

(By Mireya Navarro)

GUANTÁNAMO BAY, Cuba.—In a neat corner of a tent at the United States Naval Base here, an assortment of personal items had been tightly arranged on two cardboard boxes that served as a night stand: lotion to protect against the relentless Caribbean sun, detergent to hand-wash laundry, and M&M's and Tootsie Rolls.

The occupant who calls that corner home is a 13-year-old boy, and what he lacked was shoes. He is among 249 Haitian children who have been held in one of 14 refugee camps here since last summer while American officials decide, case by case, whether to allow them into the United States or send them back to Haiti. As the weeks drag on, shoes and clothes donated by relief organizations are sometimes in short supply.

So, the boy said, he has skipped school for five days while he goes barefoot. He was too embarrassed to do otherwise.

"He doesn't want to go to school without shoes; it's understandable," said Capt. Michael Dvoracek, the Army officer who over-

sees the Haitian children's camp, operated by a joint military task force. "We'd love to get more shoes and clothes. They are growing kids, and it doesn't take long for them to go through a pair of shoes when they do get them."

At a portable Air Force hospital, another "unaccompanied minor" from Haiti, a teenager named Marie-Carole Celestin, awaited a decision on her future, with a badly injured right hip. She was summoned to the hospital the other day with all her belongings because her doctors had recommended that she be sent to the United States for surgery that could not be performed here.

But for the third time the Justice Department said no. Her pediatrician, Lieut. Col. Nadege Maletz, said that because Marie-Carole's hip injury had existed before she left Haiti and was not considered acute, she had not been deemed eligible for treatment in the United States. But Colonel Maletz said she would make another appeal. In the meantime, she said, the girl's discomfort has kept her from sleeping at night, and so she will be sent back to the camp with painkillers.

The children, most from 14 to 17 years old but some as young as 2 months, are among the last 480 of 21,000 Haitians who were settled in the refugee camps here after they fled political violence in their homeland last year.

Most of the adults were repatriated beginning last November, shortly after the Rev. Jean-Bertrand Aristide was restored to the presidency. But scores of children remain here while the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and other organizations trace relatives to make certain that the young Haitians have a proper home when they either return to their country or, for very few, make it to the United States.

The base provides the children clothing, food and schooling. But the tent city where they live is dusty, the supplies of donated items like shoes are haphazard, medical care is limited, and spirits are low.

As with most of the Haitian children here—who are believed to have close relatives remaining in Haiti, where the political situation is still somewhat unsettled—the barefoot 13-year-boy was allowed to speak to a reporter on the condition that his name not be published. "I'm alone here," he said. "I don't feel good here. It's been nine months."

The United States houses Haitian and Cuban refugees separately here—there are 2 camps for Haitians, 12 for Cubans—and also, say advocates for the Haitian children, treats them unequally. While a revision in American policy has reopened the door to entry to the United States fairly wide for Cuban children, particularly those who are unaccompanied by their parents here, that door remains almost entirely closed to young Haitians.

Alleging discrimination, lawyers for the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami have filed a petition asking the United States Supreme Court to order that the Haitian children be admitted.

The lawyers note that the Clinton Administration is reviewing the cases even of Cuban children who are in the care of their parents here, but for whom a long stay at Guantánamo would constitute "an extraordinary hardship." This, they argue, amounts to saying that refugee camps that are hard on Cuban children are adequate for Haitian children.

American officials explain the differences in treatment by saying that Haitians as a whole can now return home to a democracy, an option the Cubans do not have. And better to keep the Haitian children here for the time being, they say, than to send them to

an unknown fate before their relatives can be found back in their country.

"I don't know how we can run a more humane policy," said Brig. Gen. John J. Allen, the Air Force officer who commands the camps.

How did Haitian youths wind up alone here? Why had they set out on their dangerous voyage alone? In some cases, advocates say, because their parents had been killed in Haiti, in others because they represented a family's hope of riches in America.

Whatever the case, tracing relatives has been hampered not only because of all the logistical and communications problems entailed in reaching remote areas of the children's little homeland but also because the children often provide inaccurate or insufficient information about their families—sometimes intentionally, in an effort to avoid being sent back.

Since November, when the tracing began, only about 70 of the youths have been placed in Haiti—or "aged out" as they turn 18, at which point most are repatriated. Even the most optimistic estimates foresee most of them remaining here through the summer.

Very few of the Haitian children—23 so far—have been allowed into the United States. These are children who had parents there or had medical problems deemed life-threatening.

At the portable hospital, Colonel Maletz said this policy had meant, for instance, that a diabetic girl and an H.I.V.-infected boy with a lung ailment had been allowed to immigrate, while four children who need surgery for cataracts and other eye problems had not, even in cases that posed a risk of vision loss.

As the camps for Haitians are phased out and the camps for Cubans become more nearly permanent, the Cubans are afforded improvements that the Haitians lack.

An increasing number of Cubans are sheltered now in sturdier "strong-back" tents with wooden floors and window screens, for instance. There are also plans to allow them visits from relatives in the United States. Neither step is being considered for the Haitian children, simply because they are not expected to be here beyond a few more months.

Still, recent additions to Camp 9, a former airfield where the children live in 24 tents with 20 Haitian adults known as "house parents," include a playground for small children, a basketball hoop and an open area for soccer and volleyball. A suspended cargo parachute provides shade for a gathering place, as does a huge tree where a dozen boys sat on picnic tables the other day, hanging out.

The Haitian youths are expected to rise at 6 A.M. and go to bed at 10 P.M. Their responsibilities consist of attending school, doing their own laundry, keeping the camp clean and helping with chores like serving food.

Teen-agers, eight of whom have become pregnant since arriving at the camp, receive contraceptives. They also have adult education classes. (A sign on a bulletin board summoned, in Creole: "Women Only! To discuss quality of life in camp. Types of activities you want. Types of supplies you need. What's important to you.")

On one recent day, seven teenagers were on "administrative segregation" in another camp, most of them for fights during which they "took a swing" at an intervening soldier or camp worker, Captain Dvoracek said. But he minimized any such problems, saying that "the vast majority are great kids."

Around the camp, the children's main complaint is uncertainty of the future. Mental health workers here say that most of the

children are handling their stay well but that many suffer from adjustment disorders like depression.

When the 13-year-old barefoot boy heard that children in the neighboring camps for Cubans were being flown to the United States, he told his keepers that his mother was Cuban. Switching from Haitian Creole to fluent Spanish, he said his father, a Haitian, had not liked Cuba and so had taken him to Haiti when he was 8, leaving his mother behind.

He said he did not want to go to Cuba, because Cuban refugees had already warned him that things were bad there. And he said he did not want to go back to Haiti, where, he said, he saw his father shot to death by "guards" in 1994 "because they thought he worked with Aristide." His hope, he said, is an uncle in Florida whom he has tried to call but whose telephone has been disconnected.

Sitting on a cot in his neat corner in the tent, bent over with elbows on his thighs, he spoke in an irritated tone. He said he passed the time sleeping, attending school and thinking about "my father, who died." If he makes it to the United States, he said, he wants to learn English and study to be a doctor and a journalist.

He said he was still waiting for a response to his contention that he is half Cuban.

"We want to leave, too," he said.

MEDWAY-GRAPEVILLE VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY CELEBRATES 50 YEARS OF FIGHTING GREENE COUNTY FIRES

HON. GERALD B.H. SOLOMON

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, May 1, 1995

Mr. SOLOMON. Mr. Speaker, those who have visited my office have probably noticed the display of fire helmets which dominates the reception area. The hats hang in that prominent position for two reasons.

First, I had the privilege of serving as a volunteer firefighter in my hometown of Queensbury for over 20 years. During that time, I gained a great amount of respect and appreciation for the selfless volunteers who devote their time and energy to protecting our rural areas from the devastation of fire. This immense admiration is the second reason for the location of my hat collection.

In rural areas such as the many small towns in the 22d district of New York, fire protection is more often than not solely the responsibility of volunteer firemen such as those of the Medway-Grapeville Volunteer Fire Company. These dedicated individuals have saved countless lives and billions of dollars worth of

property in New York State alone. And the Medway-Grapeville Volunteer Fire Company exemplifies the kind of heroism which makes volunteer firefighters such an important part of our local communities.

During my years as a volunteer fireman, I noticed some extraordinary things about my company. Its members were among the most varied groups of people I have encountered before or since. There were teachers, doctors, and farmers, just to name a few of the many walks of life represented. Despite their many differences, however, these volunteers had two very important things in common—a strong desire to help their fellow neighbors in times of trouble, and an unwavering commitment to perform their duties at any time, day or night, whenever they were needed. I know that my experience was not a unique one, and that the volunteers of the Medway-Grapeville Company are equally dedicated to and superbly skilled in their most crucial roles as community protectors.

Mr. Speaker, on May 6, the Medway-Grapeville will celebrate its 50th year of service to Greene County. I would now ask that all Members join me in paying tribute to the Medway-Grapeville Volunteer Fire Company, as it celebrates a half-century of firefighting excellence.