

Profiles of the Haitian diaspora in the Caribbean #1: The Bahamas



The devastation after Dorian

Photo: Brian Resnick/Vox.com

Population: The Haitian diaspora is estimated to account for 1/5 of the 332,634 people living on the Bahamian archipelago, making it the largest migrant community there. Peaks in Haitian immigration to the Bahamas are the direct result of increases in instability in Haiti. However, Haitians do not always permanently settle in the Bahamas and may use it as a stepping-stone to immigrate to other places or to go back to Haiti with a better situation.

Legal situation:

- There is no birthright citizenship, however the Bahamian constitution does allow for the naturalization of Bahamian born children at the age of 18. Given the challenges in obtaining Haitian nationality this creates a defacto situation of stateless while waiting for a potential naturalization to be granted.
- The Bahamas has no legislative framework in place to regulate the protection of asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons.
- Work permits are very costly; between the cost of the permit, the visa, the insurance and the accompanying documents it can run up to \$2000 or more for one single year for a low-skilled job. The prohibitive costs result in many working without papers and employers taking advantage of these situations to exploit the workers.
- January 1, 2018 marked the beginning of an immigration crackdown against those without documentation, with increased raids and deportations, alongside talks of sanctioning employers for hiring workers without working permits.
- Amnesty International has documented allegations of human rights abuses against migrants detained at Carmichael Road Detention Center while awaiting deportation.

Socio-economic situation:

While the Bahamas has the 2nd highest per capita GDP in the English speaking Caribbean, it also has the 2nd highest economic and social inequality in all of the Caribbean. This situation is directly reflected in that the Haitian diaspora can be found working primarily in low skilled, low cost labor (legal and illegal) jobs, mainly in sectors directly relating to tourism, which is Bahamas largest industry, along with offshore banking.

Today's challenges:

On August 22, 2019, Category 5 hurricane Dorian's devastation of the Bahamas made an already tense situation between a Bahamian government implementing an immigration crackdown on migrants, and the Haitian diaspora in the Bahamas, even worse. This was an especially hard blow for the Haitian diaspora, many of whom were living in substandard housing in areas that were hit the hardest. While the crackdown had been temporarily put on hold, in response to advocacy by American human rights organizations, it has now resumed with deportations and a public statement from the prime minister asking migrants who have irregular status to leave voluntarily before the government forces them to leave. With so many of their homes in ruins, many Haitians have lost everything from residency papers, to citizenship papers, to passports, to birth certificates, to work papers. Having no documentation and having had to identify themselves for registration in shelters in Naussau compounds their fears of deportation. In addition, while social media is being used to locate loved ones by all, it is also being used by some to spew hate and prejudice, going even so far in some cases as to blame Haitian voodoo practices, for bringing the wrath of God down in the form of Dorian.

Future possibilities...

In the face of the prime minister's intention to renew the immigration crackdown so rapidly after the climatic catastrophe and in a time where Haiti is in the midst of a political uprising, the future is bleak unless action is taken. The Haitian government had already requested that the Bahamian government grant amnesty to its undocumented diaspora in the Bahamas, human rights groups have advocated for a moratorium on deportations, and local human rights lawyers are on the ground advocating for the rights of the Haitian diaspora in the Bahamas. Yet much more is needed to ensure that this catastrophe turns into an opportunity to bring consciousness for the need for real integration of the Haitian diaspora into Bahamian society in order to rebuild a brighter future for all in the Bahamas.

By: Charlotte Wiener- Associate researcher for OBMICA