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## Irregular migration and asylum seekers in the Carribbean

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Discussion Paper No. 2003/48

## **Irregular Migration and Asylum Seekers in the Caribbean**

Elizabeth Thomas-Hope \*

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### **Abstract**

Irregular migration is increasing in the Caribbean while the opportunities for applying for asylum hardly exist. The policy regarding most Caribbean irregular migrants is based on the view of the potential destinations, namely that the migrants are economic rather than political refugees. Whatever the specific cause of a migrant's departure, the movement is rooted in a complex amalgam of political, socioeconomic and (increasingly) environmental, factors. Thus irregular movements are part of the wider Caribbean migration process. The irregular movements differ from other forms of migration in that they represent the informal sector of migration, providing an alternative to those sectors of national populations that for political or economic reasons fall outside the immigration categories for entry to the United States. Locations in the Caribbean largely provide the intended transit stops to the United States, but with the implementation of policies to interdict migrants at sea, many of these intermediary locations become final destinations and, ultimately, marginalized communities of the migrants themselves and successive generations. These centres are the nodal points of .../.

Keywords: migration, irregular migration, Caribbean population, asylum

JEL classification: F22, R23, N46

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an established transnational network that sustains the ongoing process of irregular migration. The economic and emotional cost and risks faced by the migrants are high, and the economic and political cost and challenges faced by host governments are also high. Irregular migration and the issue of asylum poignantly reflect various aspects of poverty and the vast economic disparities that exist within the region. Further, irregular migration and the question of asylum greatly affect diplomatic relations between Caribbean countries of migration source and destination. Better and more thoughtful policies are needed to address the continuing issues relating to irregular migration.

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## **1 Introduction**

Behind the anxiety relating to refugees and asylum seekers lies the issue of irregular migration. As with regular migration, irregular relocation in the Caribbean includes different types of movement. One is the illegal entry into the Caribbean of persons from other regions. Currently, such immigrants are chiefly from China, entering the Caribbean countries with the intention of moving onto the United States (US). A second type of irregular migrant leaves from the Caribbean countries direct to destinations outside the region, mainly the US, Canada and countries in Europe. Finally, a third type of irregular migrant originates in the Caribbean and moves to other locations within the region. Thus, irregular relocation affecting the Caribbean concerns both immigrant and emigrant, and is both intra- and extra-regional with regard to the source and destination of movement. In general, irregular migration parallels the patterns of regular migration flows, and could be considered to represent the 'informal sector' of the migration process.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, migration for the Caribbean people has evolved as the major avenue of upward mobility for the accumulation of capital, both financial and social. At the present time, the propensity for migration remains high and there is an active search for, and responsiveness to, the opportunities for relocation, whenever and wherever they occur. At times these opportunities have come from within the region itself or from the wider circum-Caribbean region, as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in more recent times, from North America and Europe.

As in many other parts of the world, irregular migration is increasing in the Caribbean. Migration continues to be identified by most Caribbean societies as the only alternative to the existing conditions in one's home country. These range from minor frustrations or insecurities to major hardships and breach of human rights. In addition, 'migrant' communities have already been established at the destinations of earlier movements of people and these provide the means for re-unification of families and the support needed to survive on arrival in the host country. This creates an important aspect of the dynamics that perpetuates the migration process. Under dire circumstances, and as legal channels for entry into potential immigration countries (particularly those in North America and Europe) remain selective on grounds of nationality, education and occupational status, there is likely to be a continuing flow of migrants trying to circumvent formal channels by resorting to informal ones.

Irregular migration itself creates its own dynamics. The successive waves of migrants departing from communities and relatively small countries have a destabilizing effect that exacerbates poor confidence in the system, and lowers morale. The situation is worsened dramatically by the boat-loads of people being repatriated. Instead of deterring further emigration, forced repatriation only feeds the sense of urgency to leave at any cost.

There are various means for migrating outside the official system, but unfortunately many migrants, whether inadvertently or knowingly, become caught up in the web of trafficking and smuggling rings that operate within the region. This entangles irregular migration in a complex system of illegal activity with implications extending beyond the specific issue of migration.

This paper gives an overview of irregular migration with respect to the Caribbean, with particular reference to the patterns of movement, its short-term implications, as well as the wider underlying issues. This will be preceded by a brief outline of irregular migration in the Caribbean context.

## **2 Caribbean irregular migration in context**

Migration has been of major significance in the making and development of the Caribbean. Present-day Caribbean societies were largely formed through immigration, both forced and free. Subsequently, emigration has played an increasingly important role, with continuing and overlapping episodes of emigration within the wider Caribbean, and also to other regions, notably Europe and North America.

Substantial Caribbean communities have become established at all the major relocation destinations. At the same time, there have always been currents of return migration to respective home countries and circular movement between countries. Migrants and their home communities have adopted livelihood strategies that over time have become transnational in character due to the associated flows of people, information, goods and finance. Guest worker programmes have also provided work for migrants both in agricultural harvesting and the hotel industry in the US and Canada. These activities provided the channel for the movement of large numbers of workers on a regular, seasonal basis.

The guest worker schemes have been arranged through bilateral arrangements between source and host governments. In some cases, the government of the sending country has been reimbursed by the government of the receiving country. For example, for many years, the Dominican Republic paid the Haitian government for access to the Haitian labourforce. Specifically, in 1980 US\$2.9 million was paid for 16,000 workers (*braceros*) (French 1991 cited in Castles and Miller 1998) but this arrangement lapsed in 1986 after Francois Duvalier (Baby Doc) was forced out of office. Since then, the sugar industry in the Dominican Republic has relied on private recruiters to find the estimated 40,000 workers needed each year from November to May for harvesting (Preeg 1985; Castles and Miller 1998).

A number of overlapping movements also occur: Haitians go to cut cane in the Dominican Republic, while Dominicans go to other locations in the Caribbean and to the US. Haitians and Dominicans are the largest and second largest groups of Caribbean emigrants both with respect to intro-regional and extra-regional movements (see, for example, Marshall 1979). Vincentians have traditionally travelled to Barbados to cut cane (Marshall 1984), and Barbadians, along with Jamaicans, have gone to Florida or to other parts of the US and Canada for fruit and tobacco harvesting (McCoy and Wood 1982). Variations in migration flow, including the volume, characteristics of the migrants, purpose and strategies for achieving individual aims, are numerous. Furthermore, legal controls for managing these movements of people either by encouragement or deterrent in the countries of origin and destination, have differed considerably. Migrations have also varied with regard to the duration of the stay abroad and in the timing of movements between source and destination. In addition to long-stay migration, many movements have been transient in nature, with people engaged in varied forms of formal and informal business activities and trade. People return and

leave again, establishing transnational communities between which there is ongoing movement of people, capital and goods.

Just as the characteristics of the movements have varied greatly, so have the reasons for migration. But the underlying explanations have remained fundamentally the same and have become reinforced with every passing generation (Thomas-Hope 1992, 1999). Following the emancipation of slaves throughout the nineteenth century (with the exception of Haiti where slaves freed themselves in a revolutionary upheaval at the end of the eighteenth century), migration was closely associated with the flight of ex-slaves from plantations and the pursuit of full liberty from the plantation system that had dominated every facet of national life and individual livelihood. Movements continued throughout the twentieth century, increasing in volume from different Caribbean countries in successive decades, albeit continually changing in character over time.

In addition to migration being associated with the desire to escape the plantation system and the traditional constraints in favour of upward mobility in post-colonial societies, small Caribbean countries have only limited physical and environmental resources. Other factors have contributed to the destabilization of many Caribbean societies since the 1980s, including poor economic performance, indebtedness to the international banks (particularly the World Bank and the IMF), demographic imbalance and major rural-urban shifts. In other countries of the region, notably Haiti, political instability and environmental disaster have added to the negative development (Castles and Miller 1998). Countries that have been spared this negative development in the second half of the twentieth century, have become the net receivers, rather than senders of both regular and irregular migrants. Thus, migration—by extending options and opportunities to a wider regional and global context—offered the people the means to elude conditions that range from restrictions on upward mobility to major hardship or abhorrent circumstances, including violence or its threat.

The dynamics of migration reflects the interplay of international, national, household and personal factors. People of all social classes migrate, but the international economic order and the division of labour, in conjunction with the level of social and physical capacity for absorption of specific island populations, create the conditions in which legislative control and inducement to the movement of labour across national borders are formulated and implemented. Economic, social, demographic and political realities as well as the perception of these influence immigration regulations and legislation, and thus determine people's access to migration. These same factors subsequently condition the method and process of entry of different national or ethnic groups into the 'host' society, and also affect the impact that migration has at destination.

Contrary to the simplistic explanations often advanced, migration is not a passive reaction to internal 'push' or external 'pull' forces. Likewise, irregular migration usually is not a simple process of crossing international borders according to the migrants' own volition. International decisions influence migration flows in a number of direct and indirect ways and, within the wider international and national context, migration is a part of a dynamic set of negotiations at all levels. Based on various geo-political motivations, nation states negotiate for the movement of labour through official or unofficial channels. This is evident in the comparative reception by the US of Cubans granted asylum on political grounds versus Haitians who, on economic grounds, were refused (Boyle *et al.* 1998). While there is no formal negotiation with respect to refugee

and other irregular movements, various subtle mechanisms are used by the 'sending' country to exert pressure on other states to receive their nationals.

Thus 'forced migration' should not be conceptualized as necessarily the result of specific persecution that literally causes people to flee for their lives. Forced migration may also result from the institutional structure of the social, economic and political systems that make peaceful sustaining of life and livelihood impossible (Goodwill-Gill 1990; Hammar *et al.* 1997).

This can occur in combination with *de facto* circumstances whereby segments of the population, who cannot for one reason or another be 'managed' in or by the existing socioeconomic and/or political regime, are driven out or allowed to leave without hindrance to seek residence elsewhere. Thus, as a result of all levels of negotiation—'free' movement or refugee, formal or informal—there is a selective process of overt or covert negotiation that operates at the interface of the needs of the immigration country on the one hand and the potential for migration in the emigration country on the other.

Ranging from the macro-level forces of global economic and political systems to the micro-level strategies and ambitions of the household and individual, there exists a variety of societal imperatives, perceptions and interactions that translate into the opportunities and tensions that trigger migration flows. Among these are the conditions that formally qualify an individual for passage across international borders, and are largely articulated in the criteria for entry that are established by prospective destination countries.

The criteria for gaining immigration priority status generally lead to the disproportionate selection of the educated, highly skilled and the young to the exclusion of others. An exception is the criterion of a 'dependent relative' of an existing resident. It is to be noted that recruitment campaigns are periodically mounted by North American and European countries to attract select migrants, of late specifically students, teachers and nurses.

In addition to those with criminal records who are automatically excluded, people from countries that are considered low-priority sources of entrants to North America, Europe or even other neighbouring Caribbean countries, generally do not meet the selection requirement for formal entry and landed immigrant status. Invariably, countries ranked with the lowest priority for immigration of nationals are the poorest and within those countries, the poorest and least educated sectors of the population are the least favoured groups. It is precisely from these countries that the motivation to emigrate is the greatest. The adverse perception of which they are victim is based on a number of factors generally associated with race and/or poverty. The negative image is also compounded by the very existence of irregular movement itself. Thus, where people cross national borders without the sanction of the authorities or the formal socioeconomic system or in excess of the environmental carrying capacity, it increases resistance in the host societies.

Irregular migration itself creates anxiety, sometimes bordering on hysteria, in the receiving countries that results in the formulation of new regulations or the more stringent enforcement of existing regulations in efforts to reduce the number of further immigrants. The concern might be well-founded in very small island states, because in all possibility the flow of people could exceed the capacity of the destination to absorb

and settle the new population within the time-frame of migrant entry. After initial concern, long-term xenophobia follows. There is the danger of politicians exploiting or responding to public anxiety and hurriedly formulating poorly conceived policies and short-term decisions.

### **3 Trends in Caribbean irregular migration**

#### **3.1 The pattern of movement**

The direction and volume of irregular movements reflect two interrelated hierarchies of opportunity based upon economic conditions and distance. At one level, irregular migrants constitute the materially poor from the poorest countries to other nations within the Caribbean, and affect destinations within the shortest distances from the point of origin, as financial costs are generally commensurately lower for these places than more distant locations.

In addition to transport costs, opportunity cost is highest for the US. The risk of being intercepted is lower in those countries of the region that can afford only rudimentary coastguard surveillance. For example, entry into the Turks and Caicos Islands since 1994 has been relatively easier than into the Bahamas. In other territories where there is cooperation with the US Coastguard, surveillance is tight, as is the case for the US Virgin Islands and through extended mutual cooperation, also in the British Virgin Islands. The selection of a destination, therefore, reflects a compromise on the part of the migrant between lower risk and costs versus preferred location.

The main flows of irregular migration are given below. (See also Figure 1.)

##### *3.1.1 Immigrants from outside the region*

Most irregular migrants moving into the Caribbean are currently from China. During recent years, an estimated 200,000 Chinese migrants are smuggled annually by organized rings and syndicates into the area, including the US. Many of those destined for the US are landed first in the Caribbean, especially the islands of the eastern Caribbean or in Central America for later attempts to reach the US (CNN 2001).

##### *3.1.2 From the Caribbean to North America and Europe using formal routes*

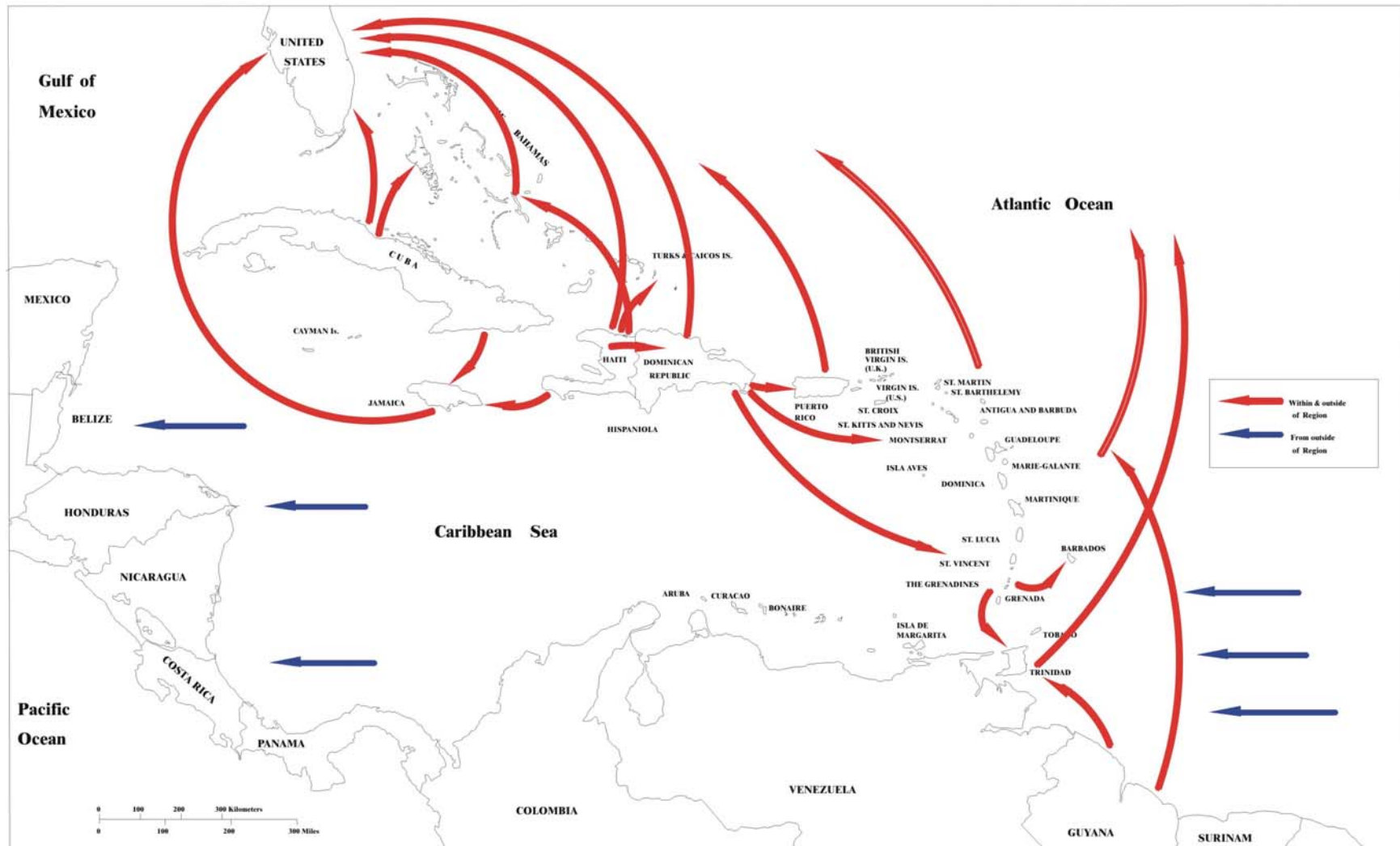
Migrants move from Caribbean countries to the US and the European Union (EU) direct or via transit points (some of which become their final destinations). Regular airline routes and the use of false documents provide the means of entry. In recent years, major movements of this type have been from Jamaica to the US direct or via the UK or Canada. Regular airline flights are used. A second but similar corridor is from southern Caribbean through Trinidad, and then to the US and/or the UK.

##### *3.1.3 Land border crossings*

With respect to irregular migration, the only land border of relevance in the Caribbean is between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This has been a long-standing crossing point for large numbers of regular as well as undocumented irregular migrants such as the seasonal workers who obtain employment in the sugar-cane harvest in the Dominican Republic. Some of these remain legally or illegally in the Dominican



Figure 1  
Caribbean irregular migration



Source: Compiled by the author.

Republic. On the part of Haitians, the seasonal movement across the border into Dominican Republic and the illegal extension of stay continue even today.

#### *3.1.4 Irregular movements by boat*

Currently, the main issue relating to irregular migration in the Caribbean, chiefly because of the large numbers involved, are the migrants who attempt to enter the US or a second Caribbean country, invariably by boat. The boats are undocumented and in many cases operated by smuggling rings. Large boats are usually used if direct travel to the US is intended, but to reduce the risk of being observed and intercepted by the Coastguard, the final leg of the journey is made in small boats, usually from archipelagos of the Bahamian, or Turks and Caicos Islands. Much smaller numbers of Haitians and Cubans travel by sea to Jamaica or Cayman and attempt to move from there to the US later.

Haiti, Cuba and the Dominican Republic are the sources for these irregular movements. Haitians chiefly travel to the Bahamas or the Turks and Caicos Islands almost always with the intention of relocating to the US, while Cubans prefer to travel directly to Florida.

Haitians and Dominicans also travel eastwards to islands having a prosperous tourist industry, such as Antigua, or to the British Overseas Territory of Anguilla, or the French Departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe, including their off-shore islands, Marie Galante and the Iles des Saintes. The British, Dutch and French colonial territories in the Caribbean are linked to the EU, and thus their economies are supported. Here, opportunities are better and the possibility of moving onto Europe exists. Attempts to enter the British Virgin Islands are rare because of the intense surveillance of the US Coastguard based in the US Virgin Islands.

The route of irregular migrants from the Dominican Republic has traditionally been—and continues to be—across the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico with the aim of moving onto the US. More recently, there has been movement from the Dominican Republic to the various Eastern Caribbean islands that could, in the eyes of the migrants, later provide possibilities for entry either to the US or the EU. This movement is also characterized by smuggling rings involved in the trafficking of young women and girls destined for prostitution at locations in the Caribbean itself, especially in the former Netherlands Antilles, or in Europe (Kempadoo 1999).

In the south-eastern part of the Caribbean, there is small but significant (compared to the size of the countries concerned) movement from Guyana, Grenada, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica into Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados.

### **3.2 The volume of irregular migration**

By virtue of the nature of irregular migration, there are no hard data on the number of illegal migrants in the countries of destination or transit. Relevant countries of entry collect data on the numbers of persons caught, detained or deported. Rough estimates are also made of the number of migrants who actually land at their various destinations, but there are no statistics available on illegal entry into the islands of the Eastern Caribbean.

The numbers believed to be involved in the movement destined, either directly or through transit points, for the US are given in Table 1, which indicates that the Haitians dominated the overall numbers of irregular migrants from 1982 to 1994. After 1994, there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of Dominicans interdicted and from 1995 to 2002 they greatly exceeded the number of the Haitians. Between 1991-94, the number of Cubans interdicted was also much higher than previously recorded.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Bahamas and the authorities in the Turks and Caicos Islands also maintain records of irregular migrants apprehended by the security forces. The former reported that in 2000, 4,879 Haitians were intercepted, 6,253 in 2001, and during the first eight months of the current year, 4,077 Haitians have been detained (Bahamian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, unpublished data 2002).

In what is fast becoming a typical news story, the Jamaican Press reported in August 2002 that 'the Bahamian authorities had detained 204 Haitian migrants who were found crowded aboard a 40-foot sloop at sea in the southeastern Bahamas' (*The Daily Observer* [Jamaica] 14 August 2002: 16). The migrants were taken by the Coastguard to a location on the southern island of Inagua, where they were handed over to immigration authorities for processing and repatriation. In all cases, the majority of migrants were male, with less than 20 per cent female.

Over the same period, authorities for Turks and Caicos Islands apprehended 806 people in 2000, 2,038 in 2001 and 845 during January to July 2002 (Turks and Caicos Islands, unpublished data 2002). Although much smaller in scale, the trend of increasing volume

Table 1  
Migrants interdicted at sea calendar year 1982-91

Countries	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Haiti	193	762	2,942	2,411	3,388	3,541	4,614	3,737	1,124	10,087
Dominican Republic	0	76	146	123	166	71	400	701	1,246	1,455
Cuba	0	47	23	37	27	44	63	368	430	1,936
P. R. of China	0	0	0	12	11	0	0	5	0	138
Mexico	0	2	0	1	1	11	30	1	0	0
Ecuador	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	5	37	177	74	38	13	5	95	58	174
TOTAL	198	924	3,288	2,658	3,631	3,680	5,112	4,907	2,858	13,790

Calendar years 1992-2002

Countries	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Haiti	31,438	2,404	25,069	2,336	733	774	1,437	480	1,394	1,956	628
Dominican Republic	436	600	810	4,047	5,430	1,143	831	531	781	279	53
Cuba	2,336	3,687	37,191	617	391	394	1,118	1,463	928	777	419
P. R. of China	181	2,511	353	447	189	112	212	1,351	2	64	69
Mexico	0	0	0	0	0	0	57	166	37	7	32
Ecuador	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	513	1,029	1,020	1,377
Other	48	58	3	51	37	28	42	19	46	33	43
TOTAL	34,439	9,260	63,426	7,500	6,780	2,451	3,697	4,523	4,217	4,136	2,621

Source: Alien Migrant Interdiction (2002).

is similar to that seen all over the region. Whether these increases in apprehension represent greater vigilance by the authorities or whether they reflect an increase in the volume of flow of Haitian irregular migrants, is a question that is not easy to answer.

### **3.3 Strategies relating to irregular migration**

#### *3.3.1 The strategies of the migrants*

From the viewpoint of the receiving country, irregular migration occurs in three ways: (i) migrants entering legally, but without fulfilling the terms of their entry permit or visa and simply ‘disappearing’ into the country; (ii) those who enter through the regular channels with illegal documentation; and (iii) those who enter by crossing the border illegally. The pattern of movement and the countries that are the principal sources or destinations of migration are generally the same for regular, formal movements and for irregular movements. Irregular migration thus represents the ‘informal sector’ of the migration process.

From the viewpoint of the Caribbean sending countries, the problem is that governments are not very interested in curbing emigration and, even if they were, the problem of control seems insurmountable. Caribbean island states have long, heavily indented and poorly patrolled coastlines, offering many potential points for landing small craft. The movements usually involve relatively short distances (albeit at times in dangerous conditions), to the remoter locations of neighbouring countries. Travel can be a single journey from one territory to another or involve multiple stages, combining in some instances formal airline routes with informal sea travel.

#### *3.3.2 The countries of migrant destination and asylum*

Haitians who began to leave their country in large numbers for the US during the 1970s until 1994 did not have the same preferential opportunities for asylum. Their attempts to obtain refugee status in the US became more difficult with the practice of interdiction at sea in the 1980s. There are still an estimated one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Haiti.

Following the coup in Haiti in 1991 and the dramatic increase in the volume of irregular migration, migrants interdicted at sea by the US Coastguard were processed as asylum claimants first on ships and then at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay (GTMO) in Cuba. Those identified as leaving Haiti for economic reasons as opposed to political persecution were denied asylum and returned to Haiti. During this time, the camp at GTMO was operating at capacity, with more than 12,000 migrants (Alien Migrant Interdiction 2002), after which Washington ordered that all other interdicted persons be summarily repatriated without recourse to seek asylum.

In response to the mass migration of Cubans in 1980 and the increasing number of Haitians landing in the US, President Reagan issued on 29 September 1981 Presidential Proclamation No. 4865 which suspended the entry to the US of undocumented migrants from the high seas. Since then, the American strategy has been to interdict irregular migrants at sea before they land in the US, and this practice became intensified with the Haitian ‘boat people’ in 1991, after the coup and overthrow of the elected president, Aristide.

In 1992, President Bush issued Executive Order 12807 which enabled the Coastguard to enforce the suspension of the entry of undocumented migrants by intercepting them at sea, and returning them to their country of origin or departure (Alien Migration Interdiction 2002). In 1993, 'Operation Able Manner' was launched with the intent of concentrating Coastguard patrols in the Windward Passage (between Haiti and Cuba) in order to interdict Haitian migrants. This continued until a new government took over in Haiti in 1994. In that year, the Coastguard was involved in a massive operation responding to the movements first from Haiti and then Cuba. Over 63,000 migrants were interdicted. At its peak, 17 US Coastguard vessels were patrolling the coast of Haiti while 38 Coastguard vessels were in the Straits of Florida in connection with 'Operation Able Vigil'.

Some migrants are intercepted by the US Coastguard in US waters, in the Florida Straits, and often even in Haitian territorial waters. Others are intercepted in the Caribbean itself, a situation made easier for the US authorities by virtue of the Shiprider Agreements to which many Caribbean states are signatories.

In addition to interception at sea, other strategies employed by destination countries, especially the US, include diplomatic pressure on the countries of origin. This is exemplified by the case in 1991 of the Haitian 'boat people' after the coup, when the US president announced that its troops would invade Haiti unless the military coup leaders stepped down in favour of Aristide. The ensuing diplomatic negotiations led to an agreement; 20,000 American troops landed in Haiti, and a few weeks later, Cedras, the rebel leader resigned (Weiner 1995). This high-level response demonstrates the seriousness of the security risk, as perceived by US in the continued arrival of large numbers of irregular migrants seeking asylum. Within the very small states in the Caribbean, the notion of sovereignty and possible threats to this are ever present.

The negative response to the refugee crisis in the region has been strongest on the part of the US, but the rest of the Caribbean has reacted similarly within their respective capabilities. The US Coastguard assists to interdict migrants in the territorial waters of the Caribbean sovereign states (as agreed under the terms of the Shiprider Agreement). In particular, the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands, which are the principal Caribbean destinations of irregular migrants from Haiti, offer no asylum. The authorities of these countries—the Bahamas, an independent state, and the Turks and Caicos Islands, a dependent territory of the UK—prefer interception at sea, police round-up raids, and detainment and later repatriation.

### **3.4 Migrant communities, transnational environments and social capital**

Substantial communities of migrants—mostly of Cubans, Haitians, Dominicans, Jamaicans and Trinidadians—exist at the destination points of the major movements in the Caribbean, US, Canada and EU states. Significant Haitian communities also exist in the Bahamas (see Marshall 1984), and in the Turks and Caicos Islands. Newer communities of Dominican migrants have developed in the Turks and Caicos Islands as well as in the north-eastern Caribbean islands of St Martin (US segment of the territory), and Anguilla (a British dependent territory). These communities form the system of networks that provide the social capital that is invaluable for the protection and assistance needed for surviving at destination, obtaining legal status or finding opportunities to move onto the US.

The transnational experience is not spatially delineated but creates transmigrant perspectives of one's personal world and options, self-identity included. It has been suggested that in the Haitian case, migrants have yet to fully articulate an identity that reflects their transnationalism (Schiller and Fouron 1999), while others state that, 'They have created no language or identity that gives full voice to the complexity of their daily lives' (Basch *et al.* 1994: 146).

### **3.5 The status of irregular migrants and the next generation**

The status of migrants is largely determined by the mode of entry and policies relating to asylum, residency and citizenship.

Irregular flows include:

- Those that move illegally across borders, including asylum seekers who are not deemed to be 'genuine refugees' (Castles and Miller 1998: 289);
- Those who enter legally but over-extend the limits of their visas; and
- Persons whose residency or citizenship status is altered through changes in the laws and regulations governing the criteria for legal status.

Changes in the laws and regulations governing citizenship and rights to work and residency can suddenly change the status of a person without the individual departing or entering the country. This action by governments is particularly questionable when it concerns changes in the status of individuals who have legally resided for years in a country or those whose children have been born in the host country, then suddenly find themselves dramatically affected by new regulations governing the renewal of work permits or determining the citizenship of the children of immigrants. Usually citizenship is granted to an individual according to the country of birth, but this can vary, depending on the regulations outlining the rights of either the father or mother to transfer citizenship to the child.

In 1991, following democratic elections in Haiti and growing concerns about the human rights of the Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic, the Dominican government expelled more than 10,000 Haitians, many of whom had lived for years in the country or had been born there (French 1991: 15 cited in Castles and Miller 1993: 137). Further political events in Haiti, in particular the overthrow of Aristide in September 1991, led to a renewed emigration of Haitians attempting to reach the US. Most were intercepted, detained and finally deported to Haiti.

The problem of stateless children has arisen in Anguilla and in the Turks and Caicos Islands in recent years. In July 2002, the issue became a scandal when the children of Haitian parents but born in the Turks and Caicos Islands were threatened with expulsion (termed 'repatriation') to Haiti. According to unofficial sources, some children had actually been sent back, but were returned by the authorities on grounds that they were not Haitian citizens. The children demonstrated with placards, using the publicity given to a protected species of reptile, the iguanas, which had been dubbed as 'belongers', in order to encourage their protection. The children of Haitian parents born in the same

islands were now considered ‘non-belongers’ and subsequently were in danger being expelled.

Irregular migrants may regularize their residency in a country by applying for and receiving asylum; being granted a work permit, or obtaining the right to apply for citizenship through marriage with a national. These regulations can be changed at any time by the host government. Work permits and their annual renewal can cost a significant sum of money in relation to the low-level jobs of the irregular migrants. Furthermore, there is no transparency in the process so that work permits can be denied on any grounds without recourse to impartial investigation. The same concerns citizenship status; once applied for, it can be denied or finally granted after a protracted period of several years. The overall issues of migrants legalizing their status is not consistent from one country to another; there is no transparent process, and it is costly and subject to revision at any time.

## **4 Implications of the movements**

### **4.1 Cost to the migrants**

The cost of illegal relocation to the migrant is financial as well as physical and emotional. Travel by sea is usually by private boats invariably operated by those engaged in human-trafficking and drug-smuggling activities. These are not concerned with safety regulations and place their passengers in danger, both from the natural elements and the law. The risks and the costs are high, even though they are generally undertaken with the full knowledge of the migrants themselves.

#### *4.1.1 Financial cost*

The financial cost of irregular migration involves payments made for the journey from the home country to destination and for the documents needed for entry into the destination country. Usually these services can be secured only at extortionate rates. In the early 1990s, fraudulent US visas were available in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago at a cost ranging from US\$300 to US\$5,000, respectively (IMP 2001). In addition, there are often a number of indirect costs involved to ensure the means of remaining at destination. These may include a series of payments to cover anything from the arrangement of a bogus marriage to a work permit.

#### *4.1.2 Physical and emotional cost*

In all respects, migrants are highly vulnerable to the risk of official sanction (deportation or detention) as well as the risk of extortion and violence at the hands of smugglers and other agents with whom they enter into negotiations with regard to the movement.

In addition, individual opportunists prey on vulnerable migrants, transporting them in ill-equipped vessels to locations that are neither safe havens nor even the countries sought by the migrants. Stories abound of the total disregard for the safety or humanity of the irregular migrants who have been left stranded in small crafts at sea after paying large sums of money for passage to some agreed destination. As illicit landings invariably take place at night, many migrants have been led to believe that they had

landed in the US only to discover later that they were on some uninhabited island in the Caribbean.

The risks to which the migrants are exposed are evidenced by the number of casualties recorded. The story in 1981 of the bodies of thirty Haitian migrants being washed ashore on Hillsboro Beach, Florida, cannot be regarded as an isolated incident (Alien Migrant Interdiction 2002). With increasing occurrence in the Caribbean, as elsewhere in the world, people seeking migration opportunities have found themselves victims of international traffickers engaged in the sex industry, being forced into prostitution at the destination.

## **4.2 Cost to the countries of destination**

### *4.2.1 Financial cost*

Border controls and surveillance for the purpose of indicting irregular migrants at sea are a significant cost to countries trying to control irregular migration. But, should the migrant succeed in landing, the costs are much greater for deportation to the country of origin or social security support.

### *4.2.2 Security*

There are relatively small, but significant groups engaged in smuggling, trafficking and other criminal activity, who travel within and outside of the Caribbean to North America and Europe in pursuit of these illegal activities. In some cases, they are criminals and pose a threat to the countries in which they operate. Another group linked to criminality are the irregular migrants who, although without any prior criminal record, are forced by their impoverished economic and marginal social position at the transit location to become involved with the local criminal elements in an effort to survive before moving to their final destination. Transporters of irregular migrants, some of whom are a part of organized criminal and well-armed gangs, also pose a security risk on the high seas as well as within the states where they operate.

## **4.3 Inclusion of irregular migrants into society at the destination**

The migrants, who reach a transit country, must then negotiate with compatriots and other local residents for food, shelter and the means of obtaining a niche in the local economic and ethnic system. Finally, if onward migration is the goal, further negotiations must be effected, involving more 'middle men' at each stage of the process. At each level of negotiation, the irregular migrant is vulnerable to extortion and abuse. They also experience problems specifically associated with their irregular migrant status, especially in terms of access to housing, medical and social services.

### *4.3.1 Health*

The illegal status of the migrants at destination means poor or non-access to services, in particular medical services. Besides, the living conditions of illegal migrants lead to increased health risks, especially with regard to infections and sexually transmitted diseases.



There is a high rate of HIV Aids and tuberculosis in Haiti (UNDP 2000). In the Turks and Caicos Islands, people applying for a work permit, which is re-issued annually at varying costs, are subjected to a blood test. The work permit can be declined at any stage, based on the allegation (true or otherwise) that the individual's blood is 'not clean'. However, the fact that an immigrant seeking a work permit would be deported if found to be infected with HIV, tuberculosis or any other disease, serves to drive these individuals 'underground'. They remain untreated and pose a greater health risk to society than if the matter were dealt with openly.

#### *4.3.2 Environment*

The harmful effects of the journey are compounded by the equally unhealthy conditions in which many of the migrants are forced to live on arrival at destination. They must remain under cover until they can regularize their status, and illegal migrants 'live rough' without proper sanitation or clean water, and without adequate food. Others crowd-in with friends and relatives who have legalized their resident status by obtaining work permits. Thus areas associated with migrant communities tend to comprise both legal and illegal residents. Invariably, these areas become environmentally degraded, adding to the unhealthy living standards of the migrants themselves and to the prejudice against them.

#### *4.3.3 Xenophobia and the image of the irregular migrant*

Irregular migrants, in addition to being the victims of circumstances, usually also become the victims of negative societal attitude at destination, and this contributes to the development of a vicious cycle of unfortunate events.

As discussed by Marmora (1999), the xenophobic attitude toward foreigners is no new phenomenon. Underlying prejudice can manifest as violence or latent prejudice. Such feelings are based on cultural or ethnic differences within a society and become evident only under stress, for example, in situations of competition or perceived competition for jobs and services. These negative manifestations become part of the normal behaviour of one sector of the society towards another and are generally tolerated by all. They may be based on negative feelings towards the 'outsider', the fear of losing privileges that stems from individual insecurity about one's own racial or social or economic standing. Black racial characteristics and poverty produce xenophobic attitude toward the Haitians by people who themselves are black and attempting to rise from poverty. The prejudice invariably represents a subconscious fear of the status or ideals of society being jeopardized or at least compromised.

The xenophobic picture of the migrant groups easily becomes institutionalized in the host society's efforts to 'manage' these groups, and to establish policies to control their numbers and their privileges. Thus, the distinction of the migrant groups may never fade, nor will their low social status improve. This phenomenon is reflected in the terminology—the belongs and non-belongs—used in the Turks and Caicos Islands to distinguish 'true Turks' from Haitians, even second and third generation Haitians. The effort to maintain the distinction is further reflected in the fact that it is not common for Turks and Caicos Islanders and Haitians to inter-marry or have children together.

In stark contrast are the attitudes and behaviour of the Turks and Caicos Islanders towards the Dominicans, who are perceived to possess attractive 'Latin' physical characteristics because of their *mulatto* or *mestizo* heritage. Dominican migrant women

are favoured for 'front desk' positions or in bars, clubs and restaurants to attract clientele. They are sought after by male Turks and Caicos islanders as lovers and the mothers of their children, who are then likely to be less Negroid in looks than their fathers. This behaviour has been tolerated at various levels of the society and the non-Negroid image of physical attractiveness has become reinforced. These images and perspectives become articulated, consciously or subconsciously, in society and impact on policy; anti-immigration policies are applied to certain groups, while others are favoured with pro-immigrant policies.

Of all the countries in the region, Haiti is the most impoverished economically, politically and environmentally. The irony is that because of this degradation, it is also the country with the least opportunities for legal or formal migration. Moreover, the persisting episodes of both regular and irregular migration contribute to the continued destabilization of Haitian society and economy. The migrants themselves, even those who fail, feed the dynamics for future flows, perpetuating the process.

## 5 The wider issues: poverty and irregular migration

Although the selection criteria for regular emigration are complex and are not solely determined by simple economic or political forces, countries with the largest regular emigration are also the same as those with the highest rates of irregular emigration. Over the 1980s and 1990s, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Grenada, St Vincent and St Kitts-Nevis experienced high net emigration, all with 15 per cent or more of the population emigrating in the 1991-92 fiscal year (CCPHC 1994). The countries with net immigration are the US Virgin Islands and, in the 1990s, Antigua-Barbuda. The British Virgin Islands and Antigua have experienced high emigration levels but these have been exceeded by high immigration levels as well, accounting for 26 per cent and 42 per cent of their populations, respectively.

GDP figures for selected Caribbean countries demonstrate the large divergence within the region. The Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, the US Virgin Islands and Barbados are the countries receiving the greatest volumes of both regular and irregular migrants. The main sources of both regular and irregular migrants are Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Guyana. While the GDP per capita for the Bahamas in 1998 was US\$14,614, it was US\$4,597 for the Dominican Republic, less than US\$4,000 for Jamaica and Guyana, and less than US\$2,000 for Haiti (Table 2). The

Table 2  
GDP (per capita) in selected countries

Year	Bahamas	Guyana	Jamaica	Haiti	Dominican Republic
1975	3,822.88	1,473.96	1,641.35	776.77	1,244.85
1980	8,735.99	1,951.29	1,880.00	1,339.76	1,990.20
1985	10,937.83	1,819.56	2,051.76	1,388.86	2,386.42
1990	14,225.94	2,036.97	3,166.71	1,603.40	3,122.04
1995	14,638.68	3,163.01	3,619.18	1,409.78	3,997.77
1998	14,614.10	3,402.94	3,388.88	1,383.25	4,597.50

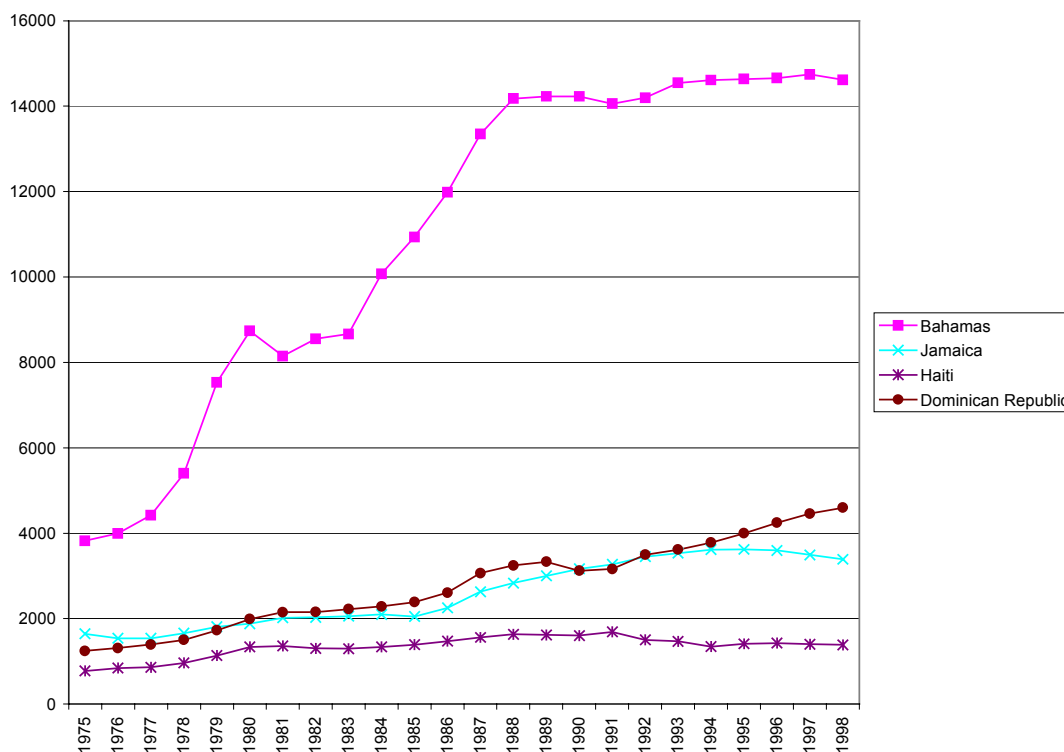
Source: World Bank (2000).

discrepancy in the GDP rates had increased progressively over the last 25 years between certain Caribbean such as the Bahamas and others, such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica (Figure 2). Thus, the contrast between the economic levels of the major countries of emigration (regular and irregular) and immigration within the Caribbean is very great.

The disparities between the Caribbean countries in their material living standards can also be indicated by measures of human poverty (Table 3). Haiti is worse off by far with a poverty index in excess of 46, ranking it 71st in the global order. Even in Caribbean terms, this is alarming since the next highest poverty index is recorded for the Dominican Republic at a value of 20 per cent and 20<sup>th</sup> position worldwide (UNDP 2000).

The limited access to basic human goods such as safe water, health services and sanitation reflects the relatively poor situation of the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. The situation is similar for Guyana and some of the Eastern Caribbean countries such as Grenada, St Vincent and Dominica. Above all, these figures confirm the particular plight of Haiti (Table 3). The low levels of access to sanitation for the Bahamas suggest an anomaly in light of the otherwise relatively high living standards. This raises questions about the country's level of other indicators, and whether these reflect the disproportionately poorer conditions of the emigrant population. Literacy rates and school enrolment indicate low levels for Haiti both in absolute and relative terms.

Figure 2  
Trends in GDP for selected Caribbean countries



Source: World Bank (2000).

Fertility rates recorded in Haiti are the highest for the region as are infant mortality and maternal mortality rates. Life expectancy and food security are the lowest for the region, and among the lowest worldwide. These demographic trends indicate an average annual population growth of 1.6 per cent (the highest in the region) and a young population (only 3.6 per cent of the population was 65 and over in 1998) who will continue to reinforce the size of irregular emigrant streams from that country for many years to come (UNDP 2000).

Finally, in Haiti as a consequence of the political and economic circumstances, environmental conditions deteriorated progressively throughout the 1980s and 1990s, exacerbating the migration situation even further. Haitian migrants have already been described as leaving their homes because their country has become an 'environmental basket-case' (Myers 1993: 189 cited in Black 1998: 24).

Regardless of what indicators are used to measure material and non-material human circumstances, there can be no doubt about the extent of the disparity that exists between Caribbean countries. The indicated data confirm the same absolute and relative picture of the Caribbean region in the global context, and of Haiti in the Caribbean context. Furthermore, the data reflect factors which cannot be measured by indicators, such as confidence in the future of one's country, sense of security and self-esteem, all of which are desperately low.

Table 3  
Human poverty indicators

	Barbados	Bahamas	Cuba	Jamaica	Dominican Republic	Haiti
Human poverty index (HPI-1), 1998						
Rank	–	–	3.0	16.0	20.0	71.0
Value (%)	–	–	4.6	13.4	20.0	45.2
Adult illiteracy, 1998 (% age 15 and above)	–	4.5	3.4	14.0	17.2	26.5
Population (%) without access to:						
Safe water, 1990-98	0	6.0	7.0	14.0	21.0	63.0
Health services, 1981-93	0	0.0	0.0	–	–	55.0
Sanitation, 1990-98	0	18.0	34.0	11.0	15.0	75.0
Population (%) below poverty line:						
\$ 1 a day (1993 PPP US\$)	–	–	–	3.2	3.2	–
1987-97	–	–	–	34.2	20.6	65.0

Source: UNDP (2000).

## 6 Conclusion

There is no sign of the demand for migration abating in the Caribbean and irregular movements will certainly continue and possibly increase. The trends show the emergence of new sources of large numbers of emigrants and new directions of movement when routes to preferred destination countries become more effectively blocked. It is evident that the urgent formulation of policies needs to focus not only on short-term management of irregular migration through increased restrictions and

policing, but also to prioritize on policies that face the challenge of finding enduring long-term solutions.

Based on current trends, and barring any sudden, dramatic events, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica (IMP 2001) will most likely continue to be the source of significant numbers of irregular migrants in the coming decades. Another country of importance in this regard is Guyana. The Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands constitute at present—and are likely to continue to be—the major transit countries for Haitians en route to the US, while for the Dominican Republic citizens en route to the French Departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe and thence to mainland Europe, countries of the eastern Caribbean, such as Dominica and St Lucia will be major stopping points. Similarly, people from the Dominican Republic and Jamaica will continue to move to Anguilla, Antigua, St Martin and other islands of the north-east Caribbean.

## 6.1 Policy

Policies concerned with the short- and medium-term issues relating to irregular migration are undoubtedly required. With respect to the Caribbean, these principally need to address border control management, social stability and national security, and the costs associated with retaining or deporting persons. But the approach to be adopted for border management has not been universally agreed. In the first place, monitoring is required to ensure that countries and their agents abide by the international agreements concerning the rights and protection of refugees and other persons in need of protection. Efforts in border management and control of irregular movements must be handled with due regard for the human rights of the individuals concerned. Furthermore, according to a liberal democratic view, people should not be returned to their home country against their will. However, there was a dramatic reversal of this approach in the United States' policy in 1994. At that time, Cubans seeking sanctuary in the US were granted asylum in return for the Cuban government's promise to prevent others from leaving the country (Weiner 1995).

Because of the complexity of the overall pattern of migration, there are implications for the entire Caribbean region. It is essential, therefore, that arrangements are put in place that will enhance cooperation between states on migration management. This should incorporate many aspects of the relocation operation, including the collection of accurate data on irregular migration and the need to share this information regularly with other countries in the region. The link between migrant transportation and smuggling and trafficking rings makes it imperative that bilateral and multilateral agreements on the intelligence of these operations be strengthened. This would enable enhancing the network and establishing focal points in each country to strengthen regional approaches for combating trafficking and smuggling, and for regularly exchanging information on this issue (IMP 2001).

Regional efforts are not wholeheartedly supported, as each country is potentially at risk of being negatively impacted by any change in the *status quo* with regard to regional migrants and North American immigration regulations. Besides, as efforts are intensified to curb illegal entries, countries will have to invest more resources into this effort. Likewise, deportation costs will continue to be a burden on the countries involved.

Part of the dynamics and the irony of irregular migration is the need for cheap, unskilled labour during periods of economic growth. Despite the claims of governments to be committed to stopping these movements, many of the factors that influence these movements are to be found in the very interaction that takes place between the countries of immigration and emigration.

At times, there is demand to curtail immigration in the destination countries. As political pressure mounts, this leads to pressure being put ultimately on the governments of the sending countries, as evidenced by the US intervention in Haiti in September 1994. But under normal circumstances the prevailing mood in the destination countries is less obvious, as illegal migrants and their legal compatriots provide valuable services in sectors that are shunned by nationals and at wages lower than accepted by nationals. Their presence will therefore continue to be guarded by those who gain the most from the continued flows of illegals.

Nevertheless, opportunities available to irregular migrants to escape poverty, and to improve their economic status at destination are eroded by their illegal status. This contributes to continued poverty at destination as they are forced to survive at the lowest margins of existence. Caribbean countries are linked to each other and to North American countries, not only because of past and present diplomatic relations, but also because existing migrant communities are connected in the system of transnational interactions and flows. Should the circumstances of the migrant communities deteriorate, this would provide additional fuel for national groups to lobby against the illegals.

The impact of irregular migration on the countries of origin is outside the scope of this paper. Yet, it is here that efforts for a durable solution must ultimately lie. The problem of persistent poverty and the international and national structures that reinforce depredation have to be confronted. A long-term approach must also include environmental solutions. When countries become as environmentally degraded and impoverished as Haiti, the implications for migration, whether regular or irregular, will undoubtedly intensify. Many Haitians are already environmental refugees and this number is likely to increase exponentially in the future (Alien Migrant Interdiction 2002). Given this fact, the countries of the north will be faced with the challenge that new waves of asylum seekers claiming environmental refugee status may well be supported by international lobbyists in their demands.

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