

Deportees' life bleak in Haiti

The U.S. expulsion of convicts, on hold for a year after the quake, resumes to the outcry of rights activists.

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 REPORTING FROM
 PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI

Dumped in a squalid holding cell and then shunned by a society he doesn't know, Patrick Escarment struggles to learn Creole and build a life in earthquake-devastated Haiti.

His arrival here this year was not voluntary. Escarment was in the first group of Haitians with criminal records to be deported from the United States to Haiti after a one-year moratorium.

After the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake that destroyed most of this capital and killed more than 300,000 people, the Obama administration suspended deportations. The practice resumed three months ago, to the outcry of human rights activists and the protest of the Haitian government.

Escarment was born in the Bahamas to a Haitian woman trying to move to the United States. When he was 4, they moved to Florida, where he had lived ever since. He said he got involved in small-time drug-dealing during "real tough times" after his mother's death and spent 18 months on probation on a cocaine-sales conviction.

Because his only paperwork was Haitian, Escarment was placed on an overnight flight from Louisiana and taken to Haiti for the first time in his 21 years. He and 26 traveling companions were immediately carted off to a police station and

placed in a holding cell in conditions he describes as hellish.

"The place was so dirty, mold everywhere," Escarment said. "They don't give you tissue to use the bathroom, the toilet is all clogged.... They don't give you covers to sleep on, nothing, we had to sleep on concrete."

In a petition filed with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Center for Constitutional Rights and other groups likened the deportations to a "death sentence," citing the unsanitary conditions in the holding cells and the cholera epidemic in the country.

One of the men who arrived with Escarment died, apparently of cholera, shortly after being released from the holding cell.

"The United States cannot deport anyone if there would be a violation of their right to life, or their right to family life, especially if they have children, and their right to fair trial and due process," Sunita Patel, an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights, said in an interview.

The U.S. deportation policy applies to noncitizens who receive sentences of a year or more in jail. An estimated 700 Haitians are slated for deportation this year, said Barbara Gonzalez of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

This month, Washington deported a second group of 19 Haitians convicted of crimes.

Deportees are systematically detained upon arrival in Haiti; because they are rarely wanted on charges here, the government releases them once their families are identified.

Haiti's chief prosecutor, Harycidas Auguste, acknowledged that detaining

deportees is against Haitian law, which requires speedy processing of suspects and bans the jailing of Haitians who completed sentences in other countries. The detentions, he said, are "completely illegal and arbitrary."

But the secretary of state for public safety, Amarick Louis, defended the policy: "We can't consider these people to be saints; we have to consider them as they are.... We have to control them on some level."

A few high-profile crimes by deportees appear to have sullied the reputation of the entire population. Most, however, try to find jobs teaching English or using skills they picked up in the U.S., said a government official who handles the issue.

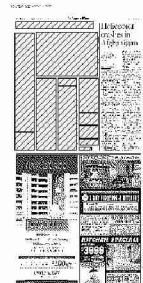
When Escarment and his companions finally left the holding cell, they found themselves in an unfamiliar country, adrift in a sea of homelessness and unemployment, judged harshly by society as they try to rebuild their lives.

"Some people have the assumption that deportees are coming back to do mishaps, to steal and destroy and rob people," said Moise William, a 38-year-old deportee with three children in the United States.

Serge Dorval, a deportee now living in a tent, likened the situation for the unpopular new arrivals to "putting raw meat in a tank of piranhas and expecting it to still be there tomorrow."

There are few support services for the deportees. Michelle Karshan runs Alternative Chance, a small organization that has worked with deportees for a decade.

"It's not a popular subject, and after the earthquake even less so," she said, "because it's adult criminals from the States, it's not a



poor peasant child.”

Alternative Chance provides assistance that includes job training and conflict resolution, but Karshan says it cannot replace government services.

Still unemployed, Escar-

ment is struggling to find his way in Port-au-Prince, where he lives with an aunt whom he just met. He left a pregnant girlfriend behind in the U.S. and regrets that he won't be able to raise the child.

He said he has even contemplated suicide. “This deportation,” he said, “has been a downfall for me.”

Gaestel is a special correspondent.



RACHELE MAGLOIRE For The Times

SENT BACK: A deportee arrives in Port-au-Prince from the U.S. Deportees are detained upon arrival in Haiti and released once their families are identified.