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Your View: The stateless state of Caribbean residents

By IRENE SCHARF

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On the Caribbean island of Hispanola, shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic, grave human rights concerns affecting those of Haitian descent living in the Dominican Republic have recently erupted. Over the years, thousands of Haitians have come to the Dominican Republic to work the farms there and provide cheap construction and other manual labor. Recently, with the economic and natural disasters that have befallen Haiti, more Haitians have been arriving in the Dominican Republic. Many have put down roots and are raising families. Today, an estimated 200,000 people born in the Dominican Republic have parents who were born in Haiti. The welcome they receive is not always warm. In fact, anti-Haitian sentiment and even physical violence against those of Haitian descent living in there is on the rise.

Under the Dominican Constitution in effect until 2010, like the United States, citizenship was granted to anyone born within its land borders. As Haitians in the Dominican often did not have documents proving their nationality, in 2004, the Dominican government enacted an immigration law calling for the creation of a plan to establish a process toward legalization. Unfortunately, that plan was never created; on the contrary, electoral authorities have been refusing to issue identity documents to thousands of Haitians requesting them. In addition, Dominican officials have been excluding from entry children of migrant farm workers whose papers were in doubt, by considering their parents "in transit." These actions were denounced in 2005 as discriminatory by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Then, in 2010, the situation became even more dire when a new constitution was approved by the Dominican government, which provides citizenship only to those with at least one parent of Dominican blood, or to those whose foreign parents are both legal residents.

As if the amended constitution were not harsh enough, a recent decision by its Constitutional Court has effectively denaturalized these Dominicans of Haitian descent, making them stateless and ineligible to vote, work or to even send their children to school. This ruling applies to everyone born after June 1929, essentially all Haitians living in the Dominican, and is expected to result in thousands of deportations to Haiti. We know that the Dominican government does not hesitate to deport Haitians, having taken credit for deporting 47,700 attempting to enter during the past year, more than twice the number deported during the previous year.

If the Haitian government permits these anticipated deportations, the deported will be unlikely to speak the local language, Creole; if permitted to enter Haiti, their citizenship status will likely be uncertain there as well.

This move by the Dominican Court has elicited strong, worldwide condemnations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees expressed concern that the decision "may deprive tens of thousands of people of nationality"; the region's own alliance of Caribbean nations condemned the action as causing many to be "plunged into a constitutional, legal and administrative vacuum." In addition to these legal troubles now befallen Haitians, these decisions are likely to exacerbate the ongoing violence they sometimes face in the Dominican Republic.

While the Caribbean may seem worlds away in the waning days of New England's beautiful fall

season, we should remember that, while we're celebrating yet another World Series victory, won by the hard work and talent of several players of Dominican descent, our brethren not so far away continue to suffer.