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NJAC Viewpoint

Treat detained Haitians and Africans with respect

As far as the National Joint Action Committee is concerned, the treatment of detainees from the continent of Africa and from neighbouring Haiti in particular, in the prison cells in Trinidad, tell a story of cruelty reminiscent of the days of chattel slavery. This issue of the brutal and inhumane treatment meted out to these people has persisted for far too long. These people are human beings who, in many cases, have sought to reside in other countries, Trinidad and Tobago being among them, in order to escape situations which were the source of unhappiness to them. If we were to take nearby Haiti, for example, we would generally be aware of its history of abject poverty and violence and the kind of social conditions under which Haitians have had to live. So at any opportunity which presents itself, efforts are made to escape, regardless of the risks involved.

Whether they may drown on the high seas whilst trying to get to the USA, whether they are caught whilst trying to enter some country, that to them, is the least of their worries. And this, of course, applies not only to Haitians or the Africans from the continent, but generally, to people desperate for a better way of life away from their native land. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago has its share of people who have come from various English speaking Caribbean islands using extra-legal means, in an effort to start a new life.

What is of particular significance, is the manner in which people coming from Haiti and Africa are treated when they are apprehended. We are not here getting into whether what they have done was right or wrong, or what the particular backgrounds of various individuals involved may be. The law can take its course where that is concerned. What we are speaking of here, is the inhuman attitude displayed towards them.

In the first place there is no centre that is established for persons held for entering the country under such circumstances, where they can be kept until they are deported. They are dumped in the prisons and the prison conditions in Trinidad are extremely terrible. They become forgotten people - ill-treated, disregarded, without legal representation and left to rot in jail in a hopeless situation.

At the same time, the government is speaking about Caribbean unity and has also been seeking to establish Trinidad and Tobago as the financial and cultural capital of the Caribbean. Additionally, there are now moves to establish the Caribbean Single Market (CSM) with a commitment to complete this process through the coming on stream of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) in the not too distant future.

There is the move to establish closer relationships with African states, whether it be in the form of direct flights to Nigeria, the establishment of diplomatic missions from South Africa and Ghana, or engaging in trading relations with various African countries.

The African Union itself has officially declared and accepted the African Diaspora as the Sixth Region of Africa.

If we were to look at the history of Haiti, we would see that in 1804, when Jean Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti to be a free and Independent Black Nation, he also passed into law that any African coming to Haiti thereafter was welcomed and accepted as a free man. In other words, Africans regardless of their nationality were welcome in Haiti and were not to be brutally thrown into prison and left there to die, simply because they were fleeing their country of birth in search of greener pastures.

In the face of all of this, why do we have to be so callous in our treatment of the Africans and Haitians. The National Joint Action Committee calls on the Ministry and Ministers of National Security to address this matter with the utmost of urgency. On this the forty-fourth (44th) anniversary of the Independence of Trinidad and Tobago, can we be really proud of ourselves as a nation in the Caribbean and knowingly perpetrate such wanton cruelty and barbarity against the defenceless person of these people, who in most cases may have violated our immigration laws, something which citizens of Trinidad and Tobago continue to do up till this day in the U.S.A., Britain and elsewhere on the European Continent.

In fact, many nationals of this country can testify, that had it not been for a particular relative or two who violated immigration laws of North America and/or Europe over the years in order to seek employment etc. so as to provide for their families at home here in Trinidad and Tobago, many families would not have been able to survive.

The big question is why must these Africans and Haitians be treated in such an inhumane and uncivilised manner. Many of these detainees, some of whom have been in our prisons for over four years ,should not even be in a prison cell. Treat them like human beings and leave them with their dignity intact. The time has come when the Ministry of National Security must provide for separate facilities for persons who may violate our immigration laws.

On the one hand we are promoting Trinidad and Tobago as the capital of the Caribbean, while at the same time we are treating like dogs, Africans and Haitians who come to Trinidad in an effort to be part of this prospering great nation that we wish to market to the international community.

What a paradox.