

More than 100 Haitian migrants found on island near Puerto Rico

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Group found on uninhabited Mona Island, which smugglers use as drop-off point for vessels leaving Dominican Republic

San Juan, October 19 (RHC)-- More than 100 Haitian migrants have been found stranded on an uninhabited island near Puerto Rico, U.S. authorities said, as Haiti continues to reel from a humanitarian crisis brought on by surging gang violence.

Park rangers working for the Puerto Rico Department of Environment and Natural Resources found the group on Mona Island, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman Jeffrey Quinones said on Tuesday. "What we know preliminarily is that they were transported in just one vessel," he said.

It was not immediately clear if anyone in their group drowned before authorities were notified of the situation. Quinones said authorities are still interviewing the migrants. Anais Rodriguez, secretary of the Puerto Rico department that found them, said the group included 60 women, including three who are pregnant, as well as 38 men and five children ranging in age from five to 13 years old.

Increasing numbers of Haitian migrants and asylum seekers have sought to reach the U.S. in recent months, often by sea, as the Caribbean nation experienced spiralling violence and political instability.

Smugglers frequently use Mona Island as a drop-off point for vessels leaving the Dominican Republic, and tell migrants that they have reached Puerto Rico even though Mona Island is uninhabited and inhospitable, Quinones said. “Smugglers do not have any regard for the safety of people they’re transporting. They basically pile them up in a boat,” he said.

The United Nations warned late last week that approximately 4.7 million people currently face acute hunger across the country. A gang blockade on Haiti’s main fuel terminal in the capital, Port-au-Prince, has led to dire shortages of electricity, water and food, especially in already impoverished areas of the city where violence is rampant.

Hospitals have been forced to cut back on services as a result of the lack of petrol needed to power generators, and the crumbling healthcare network has complicated efforts to respond to a dangerous cholera outbreak.

Meanwhile, Haiti’s government has called on the international community to help establish a “specialised armed force” to respond to the gangs – but Haitian civil society leaders have rejected the prospect of foreign intervention.

The U.S. ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said on Monday that the United States and Mexico were working on draft Security Council resolutions in response to the continuing crisis. The first would impose financial sanctions on Haitian “criminal actors” involved in the recent surge of violence, Thomas-Greenfield said, while the second would “authorise a non-UN, international security assistance mission” in Haiti to restore security and help the flow of humanitarian aid.

It remains unclear what countries would participate, and in what capacity. Thomas-Greenfield said the mission would be led by a “partner country”, but did not say which one that would be.

White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre on Tuesday also evaded questions about the potential Haiti mission, telling reporters during a news conference only that “conversations are ongoing.” As the security situation in Haiti deteriorated after last year’s killing of President Jovenel Moise, and conditions worsened in host communities elsewhere in the Americas region, new waves of Haitian asylum seekers have journeyed towards the United States.

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