Tens of thousands of Haitians flee poverty every year to try their luck in the neighbouring country, the Dominican Republic. Most of them, not having the travel documents required, turn to traffickers to help them cross the border illegally. Faced with abuses ranging from “petty” corruption to rape or machete attacks, some see their dreams of El Dorado turn into a terrible nightmare.
"One day, I heard during a radio debate that whilst Haiti was still one of the poorest countries in the Americas, our neighbour, the Dominican Republic, was the most popular holiday destination in the Caribbean," recounts 28-year-old Etienne, a bricklayer from the Plaisance region of northern Haiti now living in Santo Domingo.

"It reminded me of the lovely clothes worn by my neighbour’s son when he comes back on visits from the Dominican Republic, and his talk of the job opportunities to be found there. I decided not to rot in my village where there is no work, and to go there myself and try my luck."

Like tens of thousands of Haitians before him, Etienne did not have the travel documents needed to cross the Dominican border legally, so he contacted a ‘passeur’, a people trafficker, recommended by a neighbour.

"Passeurs" can be found in many villages across Haiti. They accompany small groups of migrants to the border where they often hand them over to local traffickers who take them to their final destination in the Dominican Republic.

Recent research carried out by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) reveals that the rates migrants generally pay traffickers to take them from Haiti to major cities in the Dominican Republic (Santo Domingo or Santiago) varies between 3,500 and 5,000 gourdes (US$82 to 117).

They usually cross the border on foot at points where there is no official border control. When the crossing is made by river, truck inner tubes are often used as rafts to help the migrants over to the other side.

The traffickers know local people who have
these “rafts”. In Meillac, for instance (not far from the border town of Ouanaminthe), villagers charge 100 gourdes (US$2.40) for every person taken across the river. In some cases, the job of transporting people over the river on inner tubes is done by children.

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Once on the Dominican side, the clandestine migrants usually have to walk for several hours, then the traffickers hand them over to their Dominican contacts who drive them to their final destination by motorbike, pickup, car, etc.

The luckier ones are able to board a vehicle, such as an ordinary bus, as soon as they have passed the border. But this only happens when their trafficker or his network have paid the driver to hand over a bribe for the soldiers stationed at the various checkpoints along the way. Those with less luck have to walk for several days with hardly any sleep. Many go hungry during their long trudge; some lose sight of the group.

SOLDIERS PAID OFF WITH BRIBES OF 250 TO 300 PESOS

Most traffickers instruct the people in their group not to run away if they are intercepted by soldiers patrolling the border zone: they know that the men in uniform usually let the migrants go in exchange for money or a favour.

Traffickers recently interviewed as part of the research conducted by the ITUC stated that the payment ranges from around 250 to 300 pesos (US$6.30 to 7.60) per person. In some instances, however, members of the group panic when stopped by soldiers . . . or the trafficker fails to give them prior instructions. The undocumented migrants run in all directions and are pursued by the soldiers, who may shoot at them, send dogs after them or beat them if they catch them.
“On the night of 9 April 2012, a group of Haitians illegally entering the Dominican Republic were intercepted by soldiers not far from Las Matas de Farfán,” says a representative of the Réseau Jeannot Succès(1) in Thomassique (Centre Department of Haiti).

“The migrants fled, but two men fell and the soldiers caught them. They put up a struggle, but the soldiers struck them with machetes. One of the men, aged 36, had his hand severed. The other, aged 24, received a machete blow in the back. Both of them were able to return to Haiti; they received rudimentary treatment for their wounds in Thomassique before heading back to their homes in Jacmel and Gonaives.”

**Some estimates**

Estimates of the number of Haitians crossing the border illegally with the help of “passeurs” are difficult to establish, given the clandestine nature of the trafficking. The Réseau Jeannot Succès, a network of human rights defenders that monitor trafficking and assist the victims along the border, provides some statistics for the North-East Department of Haiti:

- **2009:** 24,320 people (16,320 men, 7,050 women, 950 children)
- **2010 (year of the earthquake):** 48,750 people (25,556 men, 15,595 women, 7,599 children)
- **2011:** 18,780 people (12,935 men, 5,201 women, 644 children)

The actual number of people trafficked is probably higher than the statistics, as members of the Réseau Jeannot Succès do not have the resources needed to continually monitor the flows of all clandestine migrants.

Many migrants are stripped of their personal effects (jewellery, watches, caps, perfume, clothing, etc.) by the soldiers intercepting them, especially when they do not have or no longer have the money to pay the bribes expected of them.

“In April 2012, eight people had asked me to take them to Santiago,” explains David, a trafficker from the Pilate region (North Department). “After crossing the border at Copey, we were stopped by soldiers who tied our hands behind our backs. They were asking for 250 pesos (US$6.30) to let us go on our way. We barely had any money left because we’d had to pay off other soldiers not long before. They hit me in the ribs with their rifles butts. They found 50 pesos on one of the people in the group; I gave them the 150 pesos (US$3.70) I had left and they let us go.”

The danger is even greater when migrants find robbers on their path: these are never happy with a pay off and are more brutal than the soldiers.

**Haitian authorities’ inertia**

Murders are also committed during the illegal border crossing, but they are rarely investigated when the victims are Haitian. A colonel from CESFRONT (2) interviewed by the authors of a report (3) on violence against women on the border explained that “when the murder victim is Haitian, the Haitian authorities are called and the body is handed over to them”.

But Haitian migrants cannot rely on their government for help.

“When serious crimes against Haitians are reported, when bodies are found following a murder, for example, Haiti’s consular authorities rarely take any action. They leave it up to the NGOs to do their work,” denounces Jeuris Valerio of Solidaridad Fronteriza(4).

Crossing the border illegally is particularly perilous for women and young girls, who are exposed to the risk of rape and abuse. Those perpetrating this sexual violence are most often robbers, soldiers or police officers, but in some cases they are other undocumented migrants in the group, the trafficker or one of his accomplices.

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(1) The Réseau Jeannot Succès is a network of human rights defenders that monitor trafficking and assist the victims along the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

(2) CESFRONT (Cuerpo Especializado de Seguridad Fronteriza Terrestre) is an army unit specialised in guarding the land border.


(4) An NGO that defends Haitian migrants’ rights in the northern part of the Dominican Republic.
David, the trafficker from Pilate, tells of his powerlessness in the face of the rapes perpetrated against the young girls placed in his care: “In May 2012, I accompanied a group of 18 people. We were intercepted by two armed robbers on motorbikes on an isolated path. The men and the older women were tied up. The robbers then went away with three young women: one was 18 years old, another 22 (her mother was tied up beside me), and the third was 28. They cried and screamed but the robbers raped them then brought them back and untied us. They also robbed us of our clothes. Who do you report the crime to in such situations? No one would hear us out.”

Only a very small portion of the sexual offences perpetrated against young women and girls during the illegal border crossing are subsequently revealed. The shame, the fear of being considered a person of ill repute, and pressure from the family or other members of the community often stop the women from speaking out. Clandestine migrants are also afraid of being forced to return to Haiti if they report the violations they have been subjected to... and are convinced that those perpetrating the abuses have little to fear.

On the rare occasions that a soldier is prosecuted for abuses perpetrated against a Haitian migrant, their punishment is light; they may be transferred from one checkpoint to another, for example. Not much of an incentive for seeking justice.

Mother and daughter raped by soldiers

Abuses against clandestine migrants are also known to take place when they travel back to Haiti. “On 19 May 2012, a couple and their 15-year-old daughter went from Santo Domingo, where they have been living illegally for over five years, to Baptiste, a border town in Haiti, to attend a relative’s funeral,” explains Plaismont Quesnel, a representative of the Réseau Jeannot Succès(1) in Baptiste (North Department). “They were stopped at the Calinete military checkpoint. The soldiers forced the mother and daughter to spend the night in a cell, whilst the father was allowed to cross the border. They were both raped by five men from four o'clock in the afternoon till ten o'clock the next morning. They were then released and went to join their family in Baptiste.”

(1) The Réseau Jeannot Succès is a network of human rights defenders.
UNSCRUPULOUS EMPLOYERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS: PARTNERS IN CRIME?

Over a million migrants live in the Dominican Republic, most of them undocumented. It is a labour force willing to make many sacrifices to find a job. Haitian labour is much sought after by Dominican employers, especially in the construction industry.

Haitians account for 95 percent of the workforce on construction sites in tourist areas. Although the percentage is not quite as high in Santo Domingo and the rest of the country, Haitian labour still forms the majority in the sector. Research carried out by the CNUS trade union confederation reveals that there is no major pay gap between the building workers from the two countries.

"The difference lies in the working hours, which are longer for Haitian migrants, and social security contributions, which are less often paid in the case of Haitian migrants," says Eulogia Familia, vice president of the CNUS. "Moreover, 23 percent of the Haitian construction workers we questioned in 2008 stated that they had been victims of some form of people trafficking."

One of the most common problems reported by Haitians employed in the construction industry is the failure to pay the wages promised. One technique employers use is to arrange a raid by the immigration police on payday. The Haitian workers have to flee to avoid arrest and the risk of being forcefully repatriated. The rise in the frequency of immigration officers turning up at building sites on payday would indicate that the raids are no coincidence, that payroll staff and immigration police are working in cahoots.

"It has happened to me twice since 2007," explains 21-year-old Johnny Pierre from Piment (a district in Pilate, in Haiti’s North..."
Another problem often reported by Haitian migrant workers employed in the construction sector is the street mugging on payday.

They dare not report the incident to the police, for fear of being sent back to Haiti. "I have been mugged three times on payday," says Johnny Pierre. "I had 1,800 (US$45) taken from me in November 2011, in Moca. I was on my way home with a group of Haitian workers, all happy to have received our pay, when we were attacked by four Dominicans carrying firearms. No one was injured but they stole our wages. I saw no point in reporting it to the police, because Haitians have a very bad image in the Dominican Republic. It wouldn't have done any good."

Irregular workers live under the constant threat of a forced return to Haiti following an ID check, but recent research conducted by the ITUC reveals that they are often able to escape repatriation by paying off the law enforcement officers.

Migrants also report that on payday some wage clerks only give them a fraction of the money promised to them when they were hired, or postpone their payment indefinitely.

The workers protest verbally and scuffles break out in some instances, but faced with the threat of being arrested by the police and sent back Haiti, they tend to accept what they are given.

"In 2010, I was employed by the Hacienda construction firm in the Santiago region," explains 30-year-old Darius Semelus from northern Haiti. "One day, we were supposed to receive our monthly wage of 10,000 pesos (US$252). We were not paid and told to come back the following day, but the next day we were again told to come back the day after. When we still hadn’t been paid by the end of the second day, the workers got angry, they took hold of sticks and threatened the building site foreman, who called the immigration police. We were arrested and locked up until the following evening."
"Police officers clearly stop Haitian migrants in the street to get money," says Joseph Cherubin, general coordinator of MOSCTHA. Construction workers report that they are especially singled out for ID checks on payday.

"In 2011, the police stopped me on two occasions on payday," says 22-year-old Jodené Flélimond, a former construction worker who was employed in the Moca region. "I have never been checked on any other day. Is it a coincidence? The first time, the police locked me up for a whole day and night (without food) and confiscated 700 pesos from me (US$17.70). On the second occasion, they seized my wage of 2,000 pesos (US$50). In addition to losing our wages, we are often faced with violence during these detentions, as the other prisoners 'greet' Haitians with blows."

S.G.
Poverty has forced at least 225,000 Haitian children, girls in the main, to leave their families to work as domestics under conditions often akin to modern-day slavery.

They are commonly known as “restaveks” (from the Creole term literally meaning ‘stay with’). The restavek system, a long-held tradition in the country, was born out of fundamentally good intentions: very poor families entrust their children to better-off families who take care of them and provide them with an education (something their parents are usually unable to do) in exchange for light domestic tasks. The system is, however, largely misused: the host families abuse the trust of the “biological” family, do not enrol the children in school and use them as domestic slaves.

Most restavek children are faced with extreme exploitation. They are the first to get up and work until after dark, performing heavy household chores. Many describe having to carry heavy containers of water over long distances as their most backbreaking task: their employers do not usually have running water so they send the restavek child to the public pump to collect all the water they need. According to the ILO (1), restavek children work an average of 10 to 14 hours a day.

Many restaveks are beaten, humiliated and insulted by members of the host family. They are often only allowed to eat the leftovers from the family’s meals. As a result of this malnutrition, the average 15-year-old restavek is four centimetres shorter and weighs 20 kilos less than other Haitian children (2). Their social origin (being from a very remote village or shanty town, being orphaned, etc.) reinforces their position of inferiority in ill-intentioned host families abusing the restavek system.

Many restavek girls are the victims of rape or sexual harassment by members of the employer’s family or entourage. The abusers may be the head of the family, their sons (some use the young girls for their first sexual experiences) or a neighbour.

The story of Micheline (3), a 12-year-old girl, is typical of the fate suffered by many restaveks. “I grew up in a district near Ganthier, in the West Department. We were a family of eight. I used to help my mother to look after my little sister and to do some household chores. When I reached the age of 11, my mother sent me to Port-au-Prince...”

(2) Source: idem
(3) Assumed name
to live with a cousin, Florène, who needed help around the house. I didn't want to go. I was really sad the day I had to leave home.

I had to get up at six in the morning at Florene's and would work until nine o'clock at night, looking after the baby, washing the dishes, going to the market, cleaning the floors. I also had to go with containers to fetch water, it was 35 to 40 minute walk away and I had to make up to three trips a day. I was not allowed to play with the other children.

I didn't see my mother once in the two years I lived there. My cousin Florène sometimes let me speak to her on the phone, but I didn't dare tell her that I was being ill-treated because Florène was always standing next to me. I used to be beaten: when they were not happy with me, my cousin's partner would just shout at me, but Florène would sometimes whip me with a cat-o'-nine tails or a belt.

One Sunday evening, the husband of another cousin called me to ask me to go his place and get something from him. When I got there he was on his own, lying on his bed. I didn't want to go in but he told me that he couldn't move. Once I was inside he jumped on me, he put his hand over my mouth and raped me. He warned me not to tell anyone what had happened. I was terrified. Three days later he raped another child, but she reported him; a scandal broke out and it gave me the courage to denounce him too. He ended up in prison and I was placed with the CAD. I hope that I will be able to go back to school and fulfil my dream of becoming a lawyer so that I can help my parents and defend the poor."

Contrary to popular belief, the exploitation of restaveks is not confined to major towns and cities. Children are placed in domestic service in the very smallest of Haitian villages. Awareness that placing children in domestic service is unacceptable has not yet reached the more remote parts of the country. In the larger towns, however, years of awareness raising have succeeded in changing certain mindsets. Many "host" families feel guilty about having a restavek and try to conceal the fact, presenting the child as one of their own or as a "niece"... whilst continuing to exploit them all the same.

S.G.
Almost three years after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010, international donors have delivered little more than half of their original pledge for the reconstruction of the country.

The result of the broken promises is that some of the most basic needs, such as housing for displaced communities, remain unfulfilled. According to the latest UN figures, only US$2.78bn of the US$5.33bn (52%) of the money pledged by donors has been transferred for reconstruction.

Soon after the earthquake, officials from over 150 countries and international organisations met at the United Nations headquarters in New York to determine the path "towards a new future" for Haiti.

The final document declared that the funds would be used to "strengthen the authority of the state and make local governments more effective".

In spite of the big words and good intentions, most of the international community agree that Haiti is still under a humanitarian crisis as hundreds of thousands of people remain in wretched tent camps.

“Decent work policies have been given no place on the reconstruction agendas of government institutions, employers or the international community, including the United Nations, which is more focused on emergency action,” warned the International Labour Organisation (ILO) representative in Haiti, Antonio Cruciani.

The current president, Michel Martelly, a former carnival entertainer, was elected in April 2011 under pledges to address all of the country’s woes. Addressing the thousands of people made homeless, he said, “I am not going to forget you, the people living in tents, you can count on me.”

In fact, over the summer this year, many of the Port-au-Prince tent dwellers were removed from public squares. Critics point out, however, that the increasing number of people now living in precarious hillside
shacks on the capital’s outskirts is an indication that the problem is simply moving away for the city centre.

In spite of the big words and good intentions, most of the international community agree that Haiti is still under a humanitarian crisis as hundreds of thousands of people remain in wretched tent camps.

In its 520 years of history, Haiti has experienced 32 coups d’état, almost three decades under two of the cruellest dictators of modern times and three foreign “military occupations” – the latest of which by the UN has now been in place for eight years.

This political upheaval has left the country’s institutions in ruins. Not a single administration has proved capable of putting in place the most basic public services. Even before the earthquake, 12.5% of the population had access to electricity and just 11% of homes had running water.

All these conditions tripled the impact of the earthquake, which killed 222,570 people and put around 2.3 million out of their homes.

Most of the reconstruction has been done through the work of humanitarian organisations. There are nearly 10,000 non-profit entities operating in what many refer to as a republic of NGOs.

The weakness of public institutions is still the major issue facing the country. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has highlighted the failings of the existing social welfare institutions and identified more than ten public social security bodies that operate without any real coordination or social dialogue.

In addition to that, since 2004 the country has been occupied by a UN peace keeping mission (Minustah) led by Brazilian forces. The forces caused further controversy when, in 2011, Nepalese soldiers were blamed for importing a cholera epidemic that killed about 7,000 people.

Earlier this year, the president reiterated that his main challenge was to build a more socially just Haiti. Yet Martelly was also clear about the long road ahead: official estimates say that 800,000 Haitians have no electricity, 500,000 are illiterate, just 200,000 have regular jobs and 80% are surviving on less than US$2 a day.