

Dominican Republic told to give Haitians documents
The InterAmerican Court of Human Rights ordered the Dominican government to issue birth certificates to the children of illegal Haitian immigrants.

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Violeta Bosico was 12 years old and Dilcia Yean 10 months when the civil registrars in their hometown decided their Haitian names were "too weird" for Dominican birth certificates.

So, they joined the thousands of children of illegal immigrants who go undocumented, unschooled and without a nationality.

But the Association of Women of Haitian Descent and two other groups took the government to court.

"The Dominican government will tell you that accepting these children is to prepare for Haitians to occupy the Dominican Republic," said Manuel de Jesús Dandre, a lawyer who represents the girls.

GROUPS UNITE

The International Human Rights Law Clinic at the University of California, Berkeley, the School of Law Center for Justice and International Law in Washington, D.C., and the Association of Women of Haitian Descent pressed on for an international ruling that would force the Dominican Republic to provide documentation to the children of illegal immigrants.

After an eight-year battle, the InterAmerican Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica on Friday ordered the Dominican Republic to provide birth certificates to Dilcia, now 8, and Bosico, 20, and pay \$22,000 and finance tutors so the girls can catch up on lost schooling. The Dominican Republic must repeal laws that refused birth certificates to children born of illegal immigrants, the court said.

GOVERNMENT RESPONDS

The decision was a victory for human-rights activists who have long complained of discrimination by Dominican authorities. It also underscores long-standing tensions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the island of Hispaniola.

The government blasted the decision, saying the court ignored evidence and the constitution.

"It's as if the sentence was preconceived to condemn our nation," the Dominican foreign ministry said in a statement. "The Dominican government stresses that it does not

promote or support discriminatory activities against foreigners or nationals."

The government said the girls never missed school and were offered birth certificates in 2001 while the case wound through the courts.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman told The Herald the verdict, however, was binding and cannot be appealed.

ADDRESSING ISSUE

About 10 percent of the Dominican Republic's nine million people are of Haitian descent, and the number grows larger as Haiti's political crisis worsens. Dominicans often blame Haitians for spiraling crime rates, and resist measures to allow them to live legally in the country.

President Leonel Fernández formed a commission to study the fragile relationship between the two nations, the first time an administration tackles the subject, said Florida International University professor Eduardo Gamarra, a consultant for the Dominican government.

HAITI `FORGOTTEN'

"I think sooner or later they are going to have to at least give the kids papers," Gamarra said.

"At the same time, it's important for the international community to understand that the hemisphere has forgotten about Haiti," Gamarra said, "and when that problem spills across the border, they expect the Dominican Republic to be nice about it."