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## **UNHCR URGES INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR HAITIANS & RIGHT OF ASYLUM**

GENEVA -- Amid deteriorating security in strife-torn Haiti, UNHCR today reminded governments of the basic human right to seek and enjoy asylum and reiterated its call to all states in the region to receive those who are forced to flee.

Hope Hanlan, the refugee agency's Director for the Americas, reiterated UNHCR's Feb. 13 plea that governments respond humanely and receive any arriving refugees. While UNHCR hopes efforts to end the violence will succeed as soon as possible, the agency also has a responsibility to be prepared for any possible outflow, she said.

"In such a case, UNHCR hopes and expects that states will respond humanely and in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention for those who are forced to flee," Ms. Hanlan said. "Obviously, not everyone who leaves a country is a refugee, but those who are forced to flee must have access to international protection."

As the impoverished Caribbean nation continued to slide toward chaos, UNHCR said it was coordinating with neighboring states on contingency plans in the event of a refugee outflow from Haiti.

"UNHCR is maintaining close contact with all the countries in the region to assure them we are willing to help them cope with any arrivals of Haitian refugees, as well as to develop contingency plans and offer advice and expertise," Ms. Hanlan said. "UNHCR staff have also deployed to the region in the past two weeks."

Since the outbreak of the recent violence and unrest in Haiti, 30 Haitians have arrived seeking asylum in Cuba; 62 in Jamaica; and up to 300 in the Dominican Republic, according to UNHCR reports from the region. The agency is extremely concerned that should the situation in Haiti continue to deteriorate, more people will flee.

In the Dominican Republic, an experienced UNHCR emergency and planning expert arrived on Monday to reinforce the agency's presence in the country and to boost contingency efforts. He joined two other staff members deployed this week and one already based in the Dominican Republic. An emergency coordinator has also been appointed and will be based in the Dominican Republic for the duration of the crisis. He will coordinate the overall planning and operation in all Caribbean countries which could possibly receive Haitian refugees.

UNHCR has also carried out a contingency planning mission to Cuba and plans to upgrade existing facilities there to receive refugees. The contingency plan for Cuba has also been discussed with other Caribbean countries and the United States. Jamaica is also seeking UNHCR assistance and the refugee agency's regional representative is currently in Kingston for talks with authorities.

A stand-by roster has also been compiled of UNHCR emergency staff who can be deployed in the Caribbean region at short notice, depending on actual arrivals of refugees.

### **Media Relations Public Information Service**

hqpi00@unhcr.ch

HQPI00  
P.O. Box 2500  
1211 Geneva 2

Tel.:  
(41 22) 739 85 02

Fax:  
(41 22) 739 73 15

[www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)