

ACTIVITY: Sea disaster

CASE: GSAF 2007.05.04

DATE: Friday June 4, 2007

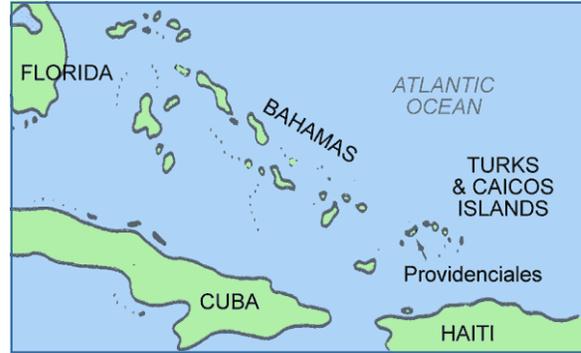
LOCATION: The incident took place in the Atlantic Ocean south of Providenciales Island, which belongs to Turks and Caicos, a British territory.

21.8°N, 72.3°W

NAMES: Unknown

DESCRIPTION: Haitian refugees

BOAT: A 25-foot [7.6-metre] Haitian sailing vessel with 160 people on board.



BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: Waning Gibbous, 91% of the Moon's visible disk was illuminated.

SEA CONDITIONS: Choppy seas

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: A half mile (less than a kilometer)

TIME: 02h45

NARRATIVE: The migrants were on a two-day journey from the northern Haitian town of Cap-Haitien to the Turks and Caicos Islands when the heavily-overloaded boat was rocked by choppy waters off their destination's coast. Some passengers panicked as lightning crackled overhead and caused the vessel to capsize, according to 52-year-old Wilke Pierre. "I lost one of my two daughters that made the trip with me. I wanted to save her but I could not because everyone was excited and screaming," Pierre told the AP.

When authorities heard about the disaster, a police boat unsuccessfully searched in the darkness. Rescuers found some bodies in the water and the boat returned at daybreak. A Turks and Caicos police boat picked up 63 survivors, The police boat, guided by the Coast Guard helicopter, also rescued 10 people who were found clinging to the hull of the capsized vessel. The US Coast Guard also sent a cutter and a C-130 plane from Coast Guard Air Station Clearwater, Florida. Five or six small boats from Turks and Caicos joined in the search. In the late morning, a Turks and Caicos boat attached a line to the capsized vessel and began towing it to Providenciales. By Friday afternoon 78 Haitian migrants had been rescued: 69 males and 9 females. The survivors were brought to Providenciales.

INJURIES: The Coast Guard said its helicopter reported spotting about 20 dead. Later the same day 16 bodies were recovered: 13 females and three males. An AP reporter saw about a dozen bodies that had been pulled from the water and brought to South Dock, the main commercial port on Providenciales. At least three of the bodies had been bitten by sharks, suggesting sharks had scavenged the corpses. Police on the shore put the body of one man, the lower half of his body missing, onto a white sheet. The body's arm was ravaged and his abdomen bore a huge gouge. By nightfall, 36 people [23 women and 13 men] were confirmed dead in addition to the more than 40 missing.



SPECIES: Not identified.

NOTE: This was the worst disaster in years among Haitian migrants, who jam into boats to attempt the treacherous journey. Every year, Haitians by the hundreds set off in rickety boats hoping to escape the poverty in Haiti.

Turks and Caicos Health Minister Lillian Boyce said Friday's tragedy was the worst marine accident the islands had seen in decades and called on human trafficking rings to stop imperiling lives. "I am asking all of you in the Turks and Caicos who are part of this illegal activity to please stop. Put an end to it," Boyce said.

The U.S. Coast Guard said the migrant vessel capsized while being towed by a Turks and Caicos police boat at 4:30 a.m., but the local government said the police boat arrived on the scene only after the accident, and that it was first reported at 2:45 a.m. Minister of Home Affairs Galmo Williams said he was awaiting a full report from the Royal Turks & Caicos Islands Police Force.

Survivors were taken to a detention center on Providenciales, the island that is the urban center of the Turks and Caicos, and will be sent back to Haiti. Later the submerged boat, only its blue-and-yellow prow knifing out of the water, was towed to shore. There is a sizable community of illegal Haitian immigrants on Providenciales.

The number of Haitians intercepted by the Coast Guard has increased recently, despite the restoration of democracy to Haiti last year with the election of President Rene Preval. Preval replaced an interim government that took over after a bloody rebellion overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004. Preval has used the help of U.N. peacekeepers to crack down on gangs that were behind a kidnapping epidemic and is seeking foreign investment to help boost the economy. But the numbers of Haitians trying to reach the U.S. show that many people can't wait while he tries to transform the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

The Coast Guard estimates more than 200 Haitians have died over the past five years while trying to make their way to the United States. In March, a US Coast Guard crew recovered five bodies after a sail freighter with 56 people aboard caught fire and capsized off the Dominican Republic.

This year (2007) the Coast Guard has intercepted 909 Haitians, compared to 769 intercepted during all of 2006, and 1,828 in 2005. During turbulent 2004, 3,078 were interdicted.

SOURCES: <http://cnn.com/2007/WORLD/americas/05/04/haiti.capsize.ap/index.htm>

<http://www.aftonbladet.se/vss/nyheter/story/0,2789,1061398,00.html>

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A Turks and Caicos tugboat tows the capsized boat to Providenciales.



Some 150 to 160 Haitians had been crammed into this tiny boat.