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Dominican Republic: Authorities must investigate xenophobic violence

The attack on scores of Haitian migrants by local residents which took place last week in a northern rural community in the Dominican Republic is a shameful act and represents yet another confirmation of the urgent need to effectively tackle racism and xenophobia in the country, says Amnesty International.

On 9 April, dozens of residents of La Ortega community in the northern city of Moca, armed with batons, baseball bats, machetes and stones broke into at least four houses occupied by Haitian migrants, evicted them and destroyed their belongings. A video circulated in local media shows a woman being pushed to the ground and a handcuffed young man having his hair forcibly cut. According to Dominican civil society organisations, at least 30 Haitian nationals were attacked and all those living in the community subsequently fled in fear of their lives and physical safety.

The attack was triggered by the discovery of the body of a young Dominican who had disappeared from the community a few days earlier. As soon as rumours attributing the killing to two Haitian migrants started to spread, the mob targeted the houses of the Haitian residents.

The police report that they have arrested two Haitians for the killing. However on 12 April, the brother of the murdered man declared to local media that he believed the killers of his brother to be Dominican and to have instigated the mob against the Haitian residents.

Amnesty International stresses that the question of whether the crime was committed by Haitians or Dominicans is irrelevant, as long as there is a fair and transparent investigation and access to justice is guaranteed to the victim and his relatives. What matters most is that a young man was murdered and then local residents were attacked, made homeless and lost all their belongings for absolutely no reason. No one should be allowed to take justice in their own hands.

The police have also reported that eleven people have been arrested for the attack against the Haitians. Yet until now, no governmental authority is known to have condemned the attack.

This kind of incident is unfortunately increasingly common in the Dominican Republic. Haitians accused of committing crimes are often the victims of mob violence and entire communities have been attacked in the past in reprisal for crimes allegedly committed by Haitian nationals. For example, in October 2014 scores of Haitians fled the “Venezuela” neighbourhood of the town of Maimón after a local mob tried to lynch them in retaliation for an attack on a Dominican woman.

The incident in La Ortega occurs against a background of growing hostility against Haitian migrants, Dominicans of Haitian descent and those defending their human rights, since the publication of a constitutional court ruling in September 2013 which retroactively deprived Dominicans of Haitian descent of their Dominican nationality. The Dominican authorities have failed to publicly condemn these acts.

On 11 February 2015, the body of a Haitian man was found hanging from a tree in a park in Santiago, the second largest city of the country, with his feet bound by rope and sign of bruises on his body, raising suspicions that the man may have been victim of a xenophobic killing - it is worth noting that the previous day an anti-Haitian demonstration had been held in the same city. Although the authorities promised a thorough investigation, nobody has yet been arrested for the crime. The killing sparked violent protests in Haiti and incidents that provoked the Dominican authorities to revoke its diplomatic personnel for several days.

Given the recurrence of xenophobic incidents, Amnesty International is calling on the Dominican authorities to make absolutely clear that these kinds of attacks will no longer be tolerated. The authorities must clearly condemn the violence in La Ortega, as well as any such future incidents, and ensure that a thorough, independent and timely investigation is carried out and perpetrators are brought to justice.

Amnesty International acknowledges that not all Dominicans have anti-Haitian and racist attitudes. However, xenophobia and racial discrimination exist in the country and the authorities must acknowledge and tackle the problem. Effective public education campaigns are urgently needed in the country in order to protect people from violence and build an environment of mutual understanding between people of different origins.