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IN MY OPINION

Sweat, generosity of emigrants Haiti's lifeline

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As the chef at Tap Tap, James "AJ" Henfield feeds hundreds of people a week on Miami Beach. As a Haitian immigrant, he's also quietly feeding many back home.

At least 15 people in Haiti depend on AJ's monthly remittances for basics like food, clothing and medicine.

Last week, he sent \$600 to pay for medical care for his nephew, who had developed a blood clot in his leg. And he was preparing to send a few dollars more so that friends and family could celebrate Easter today.

"Some days I get paid and there's no money left," he said, taking a break from work Thursday night. He excused himself and returned with a folder overflowing with remittance receipts. "I love to help. If I only have \$5 in my pocket and you ask me for \$5, I'll give it to you."

Multiply AJ by thousands and you have one of the largest sources of foreign aid to Haiti: the Haitian diaspora.

In 2006, Haitians received a stunning \$1.65 billion in remittances from friends and relatives living outside the country, according to a report released by the Inter-American Development Bank last month. The report, based on a survey prepared by Bendixen & Associates in Miami, found that the average remittance was just \$150.

Diners can easily drop that in one meal on South Beach. In Haiti, it can be a year's income. About 40 percent of those receiving family aid in Haiti make less than \$200 a year. They depend almost entirely on the generosity of ex-pats to survive.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Most of those friends and family live in the United States, either legally like AJ or illegally. Some, like AJ, make a comfortable enough living. Many more are poor, working as janitors and housekeepers. Yet they manage to scrape together enough to support the families they left behind.

Remittances are the dirty little secret of ineffective governments throughout the region. From Haiti to Cuba, to Guatemala and beyond, countries are increasingly depending on the goodwill of emigrant families to prop up their economies.

According to another IDB report, remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean will surpass \$100 billion a year by 2010. The reports don't offer a breakdown on legal versus illegal immigrants, but the estimated 12 million undocumented migrants in the United States are a big part of the financial web that helps maintain stability back home.

The "globalization" of family aid is one example of the complicated ways in which the American economy is tied to all the other economies in the region. It's also a reason why calls to deport all 12 million "illegals" are not just mean-spirited, but impossible.

The American economy couldn't take it. And neither could others in the region.

"If we had massive deportations, it would for all practical purposes not only bankrupt Haiti, Honduras and El Salvador, but it would create economic havoc in countries like Mexico," said Sergio Bendixen, president of the opinion research company.

Immigration authorities know they can't send everyone back. So they make a few deportations, get them into the news, and appease those who, either from naiveté or blind hatred, believe that the high-profile deportations can really discourage those poor and desperate enough to risk their lives to get here.

DRIVEN BY POVERTY

Guess what? As long as we live in a world of such incredible wealth disparity, the immigrants will keep coming, legally and illegally. They come to help themselves and to help loved ones back home. Governments fail; families endure.

Every time we send someone back, an entire support system is devastated. And the poverty that prompts desperate acts in desperate places only deepens.

AJ and thousands of other Haitians here are doing their part to help alleviate the suffering. It's time for us to do ours. Halt the deportations of Haitians. We can start by telling the 101 who just landed in Hallandale Beach that they can stay.