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# Rocklanders protest Haitian deportation

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Staff Writer

Rocklanders' outcry against the U.S. government's push to deport thousands of Haitians is part of a powerful protest taking shape that could save the refugees' lives, said award-winning film director Jonathan Demme.

Demme, who directed "The Silence of the Lambs," and eight other county residents on Monday formed the group Rocklanders for Democracy in Haiti. Since then, they have gathered 1,500 signatures on petitions protesting the refugees' ouster. The petition drive began with Demme and several others gathering signatures in the swirling snow at Main Street and Broadway in Nyack.

Demme reported the Rockland support for the Haitians during a press conference at City Hall in Manhattan Friday.

He joined Mayor David Dinkins, two New York congressmen, a Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York official and other leaders in urging President Bush to give Haitians a safe haven in the United States.

The U.S. government cannot return the more than 6,500 Haitians to their homeland until they have a chance to speak with their lawyers, a federal judge ruled Friday. The

refugees are being held at a U.S. military base in Cuba.

"I really, really believe the White House is scared," Demme said Friday. "When you're shivering on a corner... You're thinking, is this futile? But there were really important leaders there today — with big memberships — and a big Jewish organization."

The growing involvement of high profile groups will exert the pressure needed to give the Haitians a chance, Demme said. "Maybe a movement is starting," Demme said. "The higher up it goes, the more control the White House exerts... and there is a tremendous, funky political re-election concern here."

Demme said he was excited to hear from an archdiocese official at the conference that Cardinal John O'Connor's sermon today will be about the boat people. Just three days before Christmas, O'Connor will compare the refugees with Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph.

"I love the room-at-the-inn metaphor — that we don't have room in this country for them," Demme said.

Demme knows firsthand the conditions of the base where refugees are detained. Two weeks ago, he visited Guantanamo Bay, where

more than 6,000 refugees are being held.

"It was heartbreaking to see, on the one hand, this vast section of humanity uprooted from their country and gathered behind barbed wire in little tents, eating revolting K-rations, and knowing that their fate is very much at the whim of the president of the United States," Demme said. "On the other hand, the people displayed a really wonderful spirit."

They showed their undying devotion to their first democratically elected president in 29 years, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, ousted in a military coup Sept. 30.

"They serenaded us with Aristide songs, and at the end, we boarded buses in the sunset in full view of the two camps holding 3,000 people," the film director recalled, "and they started singing 'Auld Lang Syne' from behind barbed wire. It was phenomenal. What style."

The intensity and emotion of the Haitians' plight wasn't lost on the soldiers there, either, Demme said. "It's a tough job to be forced to function as the jailers of these innocent people. Everybody's in a tough spot down there."

Eric Alcin, a co-founder of the Rockland group, said he was en-

couraged that Bush on Thursday said he supported Aristide's return to power.

"If that happens, then the people can go back," Alcin said.

Paul Newman, also a co-founder of the Rockland group, said prejudice and misunderstanding also play a role in the situation.

A professional drummer trained in traditional Haitian folklore, Newman said, "There is a misconception that these are primitive people because there are oral folk traditions that have been misrepresented and misinterpreted."

Government officials guaranteed a "proper reception" for those who are sent home. Their arrival in Port-au-Prince would be monitored by representatives of the U.S. Embassy, the Haitian Red Cross and the Organization of American States.

Attorneys for the Haitians and representatives of human rights groups have disputed the State Department's assurances.

*To sign the coalition petition, call 358-4601. Gifts and supplies including clean towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant and feminine hygiene products for the refugees, are being received at St. Ann's Rectory, Jefferson Street, Nyack, and St. Joseph's Rectory, Sneden Place, Spring Valley.*