Students protest Clinton Haitian refugee policy

By Ruth Halikman
Spectator Staff Writer
Chanting “HIV is not a crime, why are Haitians doing time?”, approximately 100 students from the Coalition to Free the Haitian Refugees gathered on the Low Library steps yesterday to protest the detention in a U.S. military base at Guantanamo bay, Cuba of 264 Haitian refugees infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Yesterday’s rally, which was organized by students participating in a nationwide series of demonstrations on college campuses objecting to the American detention policy, kicked off a week of protest at Columbia.

Approximately 100 Columbia students, including about 40 from Columbia College and 50 from the School of Law, will abstain from all solid food during the seven-day fast to show solidarity with the Haitians at Guantanamo Bay, who have been on a hunger strike since Jan. 29.

Several Columbia faculty members, including Barnard College Professor of Political Science Dennis Dalton and Professor of English and Comparative Literature Robert Hanning, will also participate in the hunger strike, according to Haitian Students’ Association and International Socialist Organization (ISO) member Adie Baker, CC ’96, who organized the protest.

Students at Yale Law School began a hunger strike one month ago, and have since been joined by students at Harvard University, Brown University, and the University of Michigan. In addition to Columbia, students at the University of Pennsylvania and Georgetown University will also begin fasts this week. Students at Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley...
ley, and the University of Maine will begin hunger strikes next week.

“We decided we would rather deprive our bodies of food than watch idly as the U.S. government denies the people of Haiti their liberty,” said Van Jonef, a third-year student at Yale Law School, who attended the rally at Columbia.

Speakers at the demonstration voiced their disappointment with President Bill Clinton for not honoring his campaign promises to grant political asylum to the Haitians.

“[Clinton] promised he would stop throwing Haitians back to the fire from which they fled ... He must be pressured to change his policies,” Amnesty International Deputy Executive Director Curt Goering said.

ISO member Jeff Bailey, CC ’96, said Clinton’s rejection of the refugees implies that there is racism within the U.S. government.

“Clinton is using racism to spread the myth that Haitians are going to spread AIDS in the U.S., just like they’re going to suck up the welfare system, and all this other shit we hear. Racism has to be opposed everywhere, in everything we fight for,” Bailey said.

Several speakers, including Stephanie Fumo, a journalist who visited the refugee camp, described the conditions at Guantanamo Bay as brutal, saying there have already been countless unnecessary deaths because the detained Haitians are kept under unhealthy conditions.

“This country is perpetrating a crime against humanity,” Fumo said.

The rally occurred at a time when many students were sitting on the steps enjoying the warm weather. Shana Sippy, BC ’93, criticized those who were not at the promotion for the
who were not taking part in the demonstration.

"It is our responsibility to make sure these people are liberated. You people sitting apathetically on the steps enjoying the sunshine, think about these people who are being held in Guantanamo Bay," Sippy said to the crowd, a group of students holding a makeshift sign reading "Keep HIV out" were confronted by several demonstrators yelling "shame" and "shut the fuck up."

"This is a blatant attempt to disrupt our peaceful demonstration, and we do not appreciate it," said coalition member Billy Massey, CC '95.

The students holding the sign said the health risks connected to AIDS are too great to allow the HIV-positive Haitians to enter the U.S.

"I think there are enough healthcare problems as it is. We have to take care of our own HIV before we can let in the world," said a Columbia College sophomore who did not wish to be identified.

After the rally, coalition members constructed a tent structure, intending to represent the encampment, on the lawn in front of Furnald Hall, over which they will keep a 24-hour watch throughout the week.
Following the rally, protesters constructed a tent structure intending to represent the detainment camp at Guantanamo Bay.