Migration, health, and care in French overseas territories.

France was recently reprimanded by a UN human rights body[1] concerned about discriminatory political discourse and an increase in acts and expressions of racism and xenophobia in this country. The report also called attention to "the increasing difficulties faced by certain inhabitants of [French] overseas territories in accessing health care without discrimination".

In Mayotte, especially, access to health care is very precarious, and it is further hampered by security and financial concerns. Located in the Comoros Archipelago, this French island, with a population of 200 000, of whom nearly a third do not have regular residence status, holds the record for a policy of expelling undocumented foreigners. During the fi rst quarter of 2010, there were 12 300 expulsions from Mayotte compared with 14 700 from mainland France, or about 62 and 0·2 expulsions, respectively, per 1000 population.[2]

Since 2005, so as not to create an open invitation for illegal immigration, these people have been denied health coverage and, with the exception of rare emergency situations, access to free health care. Yet, a study that we did among a representative sample of the island's inhabitants[3] found that the proportion of foreign migrants who had emigrated for health reasons (8·8%) was low compared with the proportion of those who had done so for other reasons (the main one being economic: 49·4%). A similar study in French Guiana,[4] bordering Brazil and Surinam and, like Mayotte, a destination of signifi cant migratory movements, shows that despite more favourable legislation (people without regular residence status can theoretically obtain medical coverage under the same conditions as in mainland France), the rate of immigration for health reasons is even lower (1%).

The fact that there is no public medical assistance for people without regular residence status in Mayotte constitutes an impediment to the right to health protection guaranteed by the French constitution and several international treaties ratified by France. This situation was condemned by an independent French public authority, the Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations (HALDE), on March 1, 2010,[5] after pressure from several organisations, but so far to no avail. It has also asked the government to make social security available to unaccompanied minors and children of persons without regular residence status. We, too, urge the French national and local authorities to distinguish—in overseas territories particularly— health and health-care policies from immigration policy.

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