

withdraws offer to buy US West and Qwest. 1B.

TODAY'S DEBATE: Juvenile justice. In USA TODAY's opinion, "Push to jail juveniles begins backfiring." 16A.
► "Californians wisely passed Proposition 21. It combines rehabilitation for non-violent juveniles with strong penalties for gang-related drive-by shootings, carjackings, home invasion, robbery and other serious juvenile violence," says Pete Wilson, former governor of California. 16A.

MONEY: Troubled global satellite phone firm Iridium is on verge of shutting down. 1B.
► If small-cap funds are too scary, try a midcap on for size. John Waggoner's Investing column. 3B.
► The ins and outs of a Roth IRA. 3B.

SPORTS: Indiana dumps Portland in OT 127-119; San Antonio aces Atlanta 105-79. NBA. 14-15C.
► Ottawa pulverizes Pittsburgh 7-0. NHL. 16C.
► Charles Barkley can speak his mind. Jon Saraceno. 3C.

LIFE: Swimming with dolphins is as popular and spiritual as it is controversial. Destinations. 1D.
► What do nuts, shoes and Liberace have in common? 3D.
► Acura's redone CL coupe is worth the wait. If you can catch it. Test Drive with James R. Healey. 12D.

Written by John O. Buckley

Coming Monday



AP

NCAA tournament guide

Svetlana Abrosimova and the No. 1 Connecticut women are the team among 64 to beat. USA TODAY's 28-page bonus section has the women's and men's basketball brackets, and everything else you need (except luck) to follow your teams through the tournament.

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USA SNAPSHOTS®

A look at statistics that shape the nation

Income disparity

Median weekly income of full-time male and female workers, by age group:



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics; 4th quarter of 1999 data

By Gary Vagstad, USA TODAY

carries a price

Under the cover of night, they head to sea in a small boat. There's no time for goodbyes, only a final wave. For this desperate group of Cubans, hope is worth the risk of failure, arrest or a lonely death.

By Jack Kelley
USA TODAY

CARDENAS, Cuba — Guided by the dim light of a crescent moon, nine people, one pregnant and one carrying a young child, crept from a grove of mangrove trees bordering a deserted beach and walked quickly toward shore.

They carried only their allotted supplies: four boiled eggs, five apples and six bottles of water. It would be enough, they had been told, to last five days at sea.

As they left the cover of trees, they grew more afraid. Some began walking backward toward the shore to see whether anyone was watching. Two started running to the water's edge. One woman, shaking with fright, tripped over her feet and broke her bottles on the rocky shore.

Bleeding and screaming, she fell to the ground, only to be slapped in the face and kicked in the back by another woman, named Silvia. "Shut up before you give us away, you b—!" Silvia hissed, pointing a finger in the woman's face. "Do you want the police to find us? Get up or we'll leave you behind!"

About this report

USA TODAY foreign correspondent Jack Kelley spent several days last month with a group of Cubans as they prepared to leave the island by boat for the United States. The night they left, he accompanied them to the shore and watched them depart. As a result of his reporting, Kelley was arrested by Cuban police and his passport was confiscated. He was released several hours later.

and loaded in the oars and supplies.

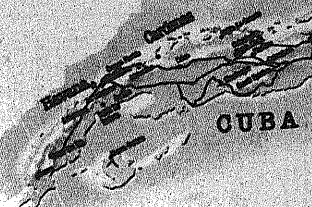
They had no map, no compass, no life jackets — and no motor. "They're for amateurs," said Raul, 29, who was running the operation.

He nodded to the group and barked, "Get in."

Everyone jumped into the boat as the four men began

By Jack Kelley, USA TODAY

Yacqueline: Had dreamed of drowning only days before her trip.



Maps and photo illustration by Dave K

pushing it from the shore. They moved so fast that an named Sayra, who was 27 and six months pregnant, fell into the water as she tried to climb in. Two of the others picked her up, threw her into the boat and swam off. Raul and another smuggler jumped in to row against the tide.

Six minutes had passed since they emerged from the mangroves. It was 5:16 a.m.

COVER STORY

Back on land, family members crouched among the mangroves and cried. There had been no chance for a goodbye hug — only a final, a few blown kisses.

A woman named Ayleen, 49, watched tearfully as her 26-year-old daughter and 15-year-old grandson disappeared into the darkness. "Go find freedom, Yacqueline," she said. "Go find the freedom you desperately desire."

Following Elian

Every year, thousands of Cubans begin a journey in tiny, overcrowded boats across the Florida search of freedom in the United States. Many leave from this very spot, directly south of Florida, so they can avoid the strong northerly currents coming off the coast and drift into the Florida Keys five to seven days later.

Just 10 weeks earlier, another mother and her 6-year-old son left from here and sailed into an international waters. Six-year-old Elian Gonzalez was found clinging to a life preserver off the coast of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Oct. 23, giving Day after his mother and 10 others had fled Cuba. Now two nations — the United States and Cuba — are broiled in a dispute over whether to return him to his mother in Cuba.

On this shore three months later, the exodus of Cubans continues. Another mother, another son. A tiny boat, packed with 12 people, is leaving, filled with hope and unknown dangers.

Four nights before Yacqueline was to leave for life in America, the small, two-bedroom house and her son, Ulises, shared with her mother was

Please see COVER STORY

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