

Cutter Ferries 38 to Haiti Under New Rules;

Policy Canceling Asylum Interviews at Guantanamo Confuses Boat People

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Body

The Coast Guard cutter Escanaba unloaded **38** Haitians here today -- the first to be returned to their homeland under the Bush administration's new policy designed to keep the boat people off the high seas.

The return was marked by confusion, misinformation and anxiety as American and Haitian Red Cross officials attempted several times to explain to the fearful returnees that they were free to apply for asylum at the U.S. Consulate here.

Of the thousands of Haitians who have been returned here by the Coast Guard since a bloody army coup last fall, those arriving today were the first not to have been given the chance to apply for political asylum in the United States.

In an executive order Sunday, President Bush shifted U.S. policy by ordering the Coast Guard to return all Haitians rescued at sea immediately to their country, without interviews or processing by U.S. immigration officials. As for those boat people who believe they should be admitted into the United States as political refugees, the White House recommended they apply at the consulate here.

Most of today's returnees, on hearing this read in Creole, reacted with vacant stares and whispered asides to journalists that they were afraid of retaliation from the army if they appeared at the consulate to apply for asylum.

A U.S. Embassy official initially told journalists that three of the boat people had asked to apply for asylum at the consulate. It turned out that the three he was referring to were children in need of medical attention.

The other returnees seemed confused about their options until journalists informed them they could still apply. A Red Cross official then repeated the explanation, and eventually 17 returnees were taken to the consulate for a preliminary interview.

"What do you think will happen if I go to the embassy?" asked Destin Wilson, 20, who said he paid \$ 120 for his passage and had been at sea for five days before the Coast Guard intercepted his rickety boat Monday. "Do you think I'll have problems with the army?"

U.S. officials insist there is no risk involved for Haitians who apply for asylum. But judging from recent experience, neither is there much hope for success.

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Of 279 Haitians who have contacted the consulate since February, nine have been admitted to the United States with plausible claims that they merit political asylum. That works out to about two individuals a month.

Another 113 were turned away by the consulate without an interview and 72 were rejected after speaking to an officer. Seven have been approved for entry to the United States but are awaiting health and other clearances, and six others are having their stories checked. An additional 72 are awaiting interviews, which are taking place at a rate of six a day.

The small rate of success for Haitians seeking to leave the poverty and violence of their homeland by applying to the consulate is in stark contrast to the experience of some 34,000 Haitian boat people who have been rescued by Coast Guard ships since last fall and processed by U.S. immigration officials at the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba.

About a third of the 27,000 already interviewed there -- some 9,000 -- have been cleared for entrance into the United States by the Immigration and Naturalization Service since last fall.

The Bush administration has said facilities here will be expanded but until now the consulate generally has not accepted walk-ins. Instead, it has required all applicants to write or phone for an appointment. The overwhelming majority of Haitians are illiterate and have no access to a telephone.

The Bush administration, in announcing the new policy Sunday, said it was necessary because the processing facility and accommodations at Guantanamo were overwhelmed and the seven Coast Guard cutters in the area were full of Haitians as well.

"The safety of Haitians is best assured by remaining in their country," the White House statement said.

One embassy official said today that according to his personal estimate, some 80 to 88 percent of all Haitians would go to the United States if they could. The official added that in his view, only two to five of every 1,000 Haitian refugees picked up by the Coast Guard had plausible claims for political asylum. Another estimated that no more than 5 percent deserved to be admitted to the United States.

Other U.S. officials said that what they characterized as naive INS interviewers, unfamiliar with social realities in Haiti, were hoodwinked by the boat people they interviewed at Guantanamo into granting so many requests for political asylum.

To establish a plausible claim for political asylum and be admitted to the United States, Haitians must prove that they fall into at least one at-risk category: that they have a justifiable, immediate fear for their lives; that they hold a sensitive position in a persecuted political or religious organization or held one in the government of ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide; or that they worked in such positions as radio journalists that are likely to attract repression.

The torrent of Haitian boat people began after the violent army coup that ousted the democratically elected Aristide Sept. 30. The United States and other countries in the hemisphere responded with a crippling economic embargo that cost some 150,000 Haitians their jobs, according to U.S. government estimates.

Today, Aristide lives in exile in Venezuela, military repression continues against those who overtly demonstrate their support of the ousted leader, and Haiti's main export has become people, who say they are fleeing a land devoid of hope, liberty and employment.

Aristide, who won a landslide victory in this country's first free elections in December 1990, continues to command the support of a large majority of his countrymen, by all available evidence.

In a poll last month by Radio Metropole, the most respected radio news station in Haiti, about 60 percent of respondents said they thought Aristide or his choice for prime minister, Rene Theodore, were the leaders "capable

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of managing the current crisis." The next most popular answer, former president Leslie Manigat, was backed by just 16 percent.

Graphic

PHOTO, HAITIANS PICKED UP AT SEA BY CUTTER ESCANABA AWAIT PROCESSING IN PORT-AU-PRINCE. EVENTUALLY, 17 APPLIED AT U.S. CONSULATE TO SEEK ASYLUM. AFP

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