

U.S. to Send Cubans Rescued at Sea to Guantanamo; Clinton Decision Upends Three-Decade-Old Policy

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Body

Faced with a growing influx of Cuban refugees, President Clinton last night decided Cubans rescued at sea will be sent to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay rather than to the United States, administration officials said.

The plan ends nearly three decades of granting automatic U.S. political asylum to virtually all Cubans who flee Fidel Castro's leftist government. Clinton is to announce the decision at a news conference this afternoon, officials said.

As a first step in making public the change, Attorney General Janet Reno announced last night that Cubans picked up at sea will be detained indefinitely by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, effective immediately.

Speaking at a hastily called news conference at 10:30 p.m., just hours after she and other top officials had emphasized the refugee situation was under control, Reno said the Cubans would be held until a "determination" is made on how they will be processed for entry.

She declined to say where they would be held, but other officials said the Cubans would be sent to the naval base at Guantanamo Bay on Cuba's southeastern end. There they would join nearly 15,000 Haitian refugees who have been there since a refugee camp was opened at the base seven weeks ago in response to a crisis over persons fleeing Haiti's military government.

If Guantanamo Bay fills up, the Cubans would be taken to third countries, if havens elsewhere can be found for them, officials said. Currently there is room for at least 6,000 Cubans at Guantanamo Bay.

Clinton made the decision on the Cubans after two lengthy meetings of foreign policy advisers and representatives from the Justice Department. He was responding to an upsurge in arrivals of Cubans in Florida resulting from Cuban leader Castro's recent decision to loosen controls over citizens willing to set off across the Florida Straits in rafts or other makeshift vessels.

The inflow of more than 2,000 Cubans in the past week, highest rate since 1980, led Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles (D) to proclaim a state of emergency and accuse the Clinton administration during the day of being in "denial" over the seriousness of the situation.

Statements by Reno and White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers had initially played down Chiles's concerns. But the administration changed course later in the day, spurred in part by Chiles's pressure and in part by reports that hundreds or thousands of Cubans were lining the shores preparing to flee.

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Last night Chile's criticism turned to praise in response to Reno's announcement. The governor said he was delighted by the change, which he said "keeps Castro from being able to call the shots" on U.S. immigration policy, the Associated Press reported.

Under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, Cubans who reach U.S. shores are effectively granted immediate political asylum. By custom, automatic asylum also was extended to Cubans rescued at sea.

Under the new policy, officials said, Cubans taken to Guantanamo Bay might have to apply for asylum under normal procedures. That means they would have to show they have a well-founded fear of persecution if returned to Cuba.

The refugees might also be able to apply for routine immigration, by virtue of family ties or other criteria. The precise procedures could not be ascertained last night.

Administration officials said potential refugees must understand they will not be "coming to the United States in three days," a senior administration official said.

"This is a deterrent measure," he added.

Reno said the new policy of detention applies only to Cubans picked up at sea, implying Cubans who somehow make the crossing to U.S. shores still would be eligible for immediate asylum under the 1966 act.

The deterrent aspect of the proposed policy is similar to policy toward Haitian refugees, although Haitians still would be less privileged than Cubans. Haitian boat people are also ferried to Guantanamo Bay, but are offered no chance at asylum in the United States. Currently numbering more than 14,000, they are to be held there until the ouster of the Haitian military regime, which Clinton has pledged to carry out by force if necessary.

Yesterday's recommendation is designed to rob Castro of the safety valve represented by the steady stream out of his country of boat people disgruntled with his rule, senior officials said.

So far, Castro has allowed persons to leave in small boats but has not unleashed an uncontrolled flow by permitting larger vessels to flee. Administration officials calculated Castro would not risk launching a major exodus that might overwhelm the Guantanamo Bay safe haven.

At the same time, however, the new policy would respond to Castro's complaint that automatic asylum given boat people acts as a magnet for Cubans to flee the island.

Castro also has complained the American economic embargo of his island encourages Cubans to flee. Administration officials emphatically insist no loosening of the embargo is on the way.

Officials said the numbers of U.S. Coast Guard vessels in the Florida Straits would be increased. Means of streamlining immigration and political asylum procedures through the U.S. Interests Section in Havana were under study, they added.

Administration officials said they would consult with leaders of the Cuban exile community and were confident of support. They noted Cuban Americans had not launched a flotilla toward Cuba to pick up refugees, as they did in 1980. In a dramatic exodus then known as the Mariel boatlift, 125,000 Cubans came to the United States.

In recent days, however, Cuban Americans have expressed a desire to spare Miami another major influx and also to deprive Castro of a means of shifting domestic problems to the United States.

Some U.S. officials said the recommendations were in effect preemptive, since the current influx from Cuba had not reached crisis proportions. They noted 9 of 10 new arrivals had found shelter with friends and relatives. No large scale emergency housing had been necessary.

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At a news briefing earlier yesterday, Reno emphasized the Cuban refugee situation was under control. But she also appealed to **Cubans** in Cuba not to take the **seas** for the risky crossing to Florida. "Putting a boat or raft to **sea** means putting life and limb at risk," she said.

The appeal seemed to foreshadow one of **Clinton's** selling points for the new **policy** toward Cuban refugees: humanitarian concerns over safety of boat people, of whom scores if not hundreds have died at **sea** trying to cross the Florida Straits. "The humanitarian aspect is a big part of all this," a senior official said.

In a separate development, the Pentagon said four **U.S.** military police were injured in a disturbance set off when they broke up a fight between two Haitian refugees at **Guantanamo** Bay. It was the second violent incident there in a week.

Pentagon spokesman Dennis Boxx said no force was used to quell the disturbance, which began just before midnight Wednesday night and lasted about an hour, the Associated Press reported. No Haitians were injured.

"It was a minor incident," Boxx said of the event, which began when the MPs intervened in a fight between a male and a female refugee. Boxx said the male feigned injury from the peacemaking, and that incited others nearby to throw objects at the military police.

Two of the injured MPs returned to duty and the two others were placed in their quarters to recover, Boxx said. He said one had a twisted knee and the other a twisted ankle.

On Saturday, 20 **U.S.** military police and 45 Haitians were injured in a four-hour melee.

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