

REFUGEES SUSPECTED OF STAGED 'LANDINGS' / OFFICIALS SAY THAT MANY PAY SMUGGLERS FOR THEIR PASSAGE FROM CUBA. LATER, THEY FAKE AN ARRIVAL.

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Body

The tale that the newly arrived Cuban immigrant told was like those of thousands of others who have reached Florida by boat in the last 40 years.

With a group of companions, he spent days at sea in a small wooden boat on a desperate journey to flee his Communist-ruled homeland for a land of opportunity.

Or so he said.

But his story did not quite add up for Border Patrol agents who interviewed him on Feb. 1. Possibly it was his clean-shaven face and those of the other men who said they had spent nine days at sea in an overcrowded motorboat. Or maybe it was the fact that the agents saw no signs of long exposure to unrelenting tropical sun, waves and winds.

Immigration officials said they suspected the 11 Cubans, like many others who have reached Florida in recent months, had been brought to the United States by smugglers days before they staged a showy "landing" in the heart of Miami Beach.

"We think it was a staged landing," Dan Geoghegan, assistant chief in the Border Patrol's Miami office, said after the group was picked up by Miami Beach police. "Possibly they were dropped off in Bimini, and someone picked them up there."

A standard route for Cubans smuggled to Miami is from Cuba to Bimini or another island in the Bahamas archipelago, then a trip across the Gulf Stream to Florida.

Others, such as "Ray," whose U.S. resident brother paid a smuggler \$8,000 for his passage, are brought directly to Florida, dropped off after dark, and instructed to put on the clothes they wore leaving Cuba, then appear in Miami Beach to be rounded up by the Border Patrol.

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Ray, who declined to be interviewed, said through relatives that he was smuggled to Key West in mid-December and picked up by his brother, who rented a convertible for the three-hour trip to Miami. He spent Christmas in Miami with his family before rejoining the Cubans with whom he had traveled to Florida for a staged landing in early January in Miami Beach.

His cousins in Miami were amused when they saw Ray's "arrival" on an evening news broadcast. He had joked with them that he hoped all of the American fast food he had eaten would not show up on X-rays during the Immigration and Naturalization Service health screening before his release.

The INS's Krome detention center outside Miami is so full of criminal immigrants awaiting deportation that noncriminals are typically held for just a few hours before being released into the community. During that time they are given a physical exam to make sure they do not carry communicable diseases.

Ray was one of more than 700 illegal Cuban refugees who have been picked up by the Border Patrol in southern Florida since Oct. 1, a surge in arrivals that most authorities believe were brought in by smugglers.

Unlike smuggled immigrants from Haiti, Mexico and other countries, Cubans do not risk being deported to their homeland if they are picked up on shore because the United States does not have diplomatic relations with Havana and a 1995 U.S.-Cuban agreement that allows repatriation of Cubans picked up at sea does not extend to those who make it to shore.

"Cubans are aware that they won't be deported from the United States," Geoghegan said. As a result, almost every Cuban who reaches Florida is granted permanent residency eventually, INS officials said. So smuggled Cubans seek out police or the Border Patrol rather than trying to avoid them so that they can obtain work permits.

But the smugglers who transport them want to keep secret the areas where they land immigrants, and they want to avoid U.S. authorities because smuggling is a federal crime and is punishable with the death penalty if any immigrant is killed during a smuggling run.

In some cases immigrants are held in safe houses by the smugglers until their families have paid in full for their passage - another reason for staged arrivals.

Staging beach landings also generates more sympathy for the newcomers rather than having them walk into the INS's bland Miami office tower and announce their arrival. In Miami, a city that is home to the U.S. Cuban exile population, newly arrived Cubans are viewed almost as heroes for leaving Fidel Castro's Cuba.

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