

U.S. REVERSES POLICY, BARS CUBAN REFUGEES CLINTON SAID HE DIDN'T WANT ANOTHER MARIEL BOATLIFT. HIS DECISION WILL FURTHER STRAIN THE REFUGEE CAMP AT GUANTANAMO.

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Body

Reversing nearly 30 years of U.S. policy, President Clinton yesterday announced that fleeing Cubans intercepted at sea would not be allowed into the United States.

Clinton said the Cubans would be detained at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He and other administration officials ducked questions about when they might leave there and where they might go.

The President was acting to stem a growing wave of Cubans headed for South Florida. He warned that he was not going to permit a replay of the 1980 **Mariel** boatlift - a high-seas exodus to America of 125,000 Cuban **refugees**.

"The Cuban government will not succeed in any attempt to dictate American immigration policy," Clinton said.

During a news conference, Clinton accused Cuban President Fidel Castro of encouraging Cubans to make the risky passage in "a cold-blooded attempt to maintain the Castro grip on Cuba and to divert attention from his failed communist policies."

The President said the recent flight of Cubans - more than 2,000 in the last week - was an attempt by Castro "to export his political and economic problems to the United States."

"The people of the entire United States do not want to see another **Mariel** boatlift," Clinton said. "It was wrong then, and it's wrong now."

Administration sources said last night that President Clinton was strongly considering taking additional actions to exert political and economic pressure on the Castro regime.

Among the steps being considered are reducing charter flights from the United States to Cuba and limiting amounts of currency that Cuban-American families send to their relatives in Cuba, sources said.

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The administration also is considering ways to increase international broadcasts to Cuba on Radio Marti and more public and official condemnation of human-rights violations in Cuba in international forums, such as the United Nations, sources said.

The administration had announced Thursday night that Cubans who do make it to the United States without being intercepted by the Coast Guard or Navy would be detained rather than released into the local community, as they had been previously.

While some critics of the new Clinton policy have questioned the legality of such detentions, Attorney General Janet Reno said the Cubans could legally be held.

At an afternoon news conference, Reno repeatedly dodged questions about how long the Cubans would be held - either in Guantanamo Bay or in Florida. She said the administration was more concerned with stopping the outflow of refugees than resolving that question.

Clinton's policy shift effectively strips Cubans of much of the special treatment they have enjoyed as asylum-seekers since 1966.

Until now, all Cubans had to do to win asylum in the United States was prove that they were Cubans.

Haitians, on the other hand, have been prevented from landing here, a ban that prompts charges of racism. Most Haitians are black, while Cuba's largely Hispanic population includes whites and blacks.

Now both Haitians and Cubans who are intercepted at sea will be detained at Guantanamo.

"It's clearly an acknowledgment of the differential treatment," said Arthur Helton, a refugee-law expert with the Open Society Institute who has worked with Haitians. "But more fundamentally, this is a declaration now of equal mistreatment for all."

Like thousands of Haitians before them, Cubans will be detained at Guantanamo indefinitely with only vague guarantees from the U.S. government to transfer them to safe havens in other countries.

So far this year, about 7,500 Cubans have fled their country for the United States; a third of those people have left this month alone.

Cubans took to the sea in greater numbers after violent demonstrations in Havana. Castro responded by loosening controls on people who try to take off for Florida in inner tubes, rubber dinghies and makeshift boats.

Clinton said that by picking up the Cubans at sea - before they set foot on U.S. soil - he was not violating U.S. law. The Cold War-era Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 allows asylum for Cubans after a year in the United States.

Even if Clinton is working within the law, his decision will strain the ability of the U.S. military to deal with refugees at Guantanamo.

The 45-square-mile base, which has been in U.S. hands since 1903, is already detaining more than 15,000 Haitians in tents packed onto an abandoned, one-mile airstrip.

Violence has flared at the camps in the last week. In one incident, desperate Haitians climbed over a wire fence, jumped over a cliff and into the water, thinking they could swim to Cuba.

Bill Frelick, a refugee advocate with the U.S. Committee for Refugees who has been to Guantanamo to assess conditions, said the arrival of Cubans would create "an almost unmanageable situation."

"There's going to be a very, very volatile situation at Guantanamo," Frelick said. "I imagine they will keep them as far apart as they can."

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Petty Officer Brandon Mudd, an information officer at Guantanamo, said no specific arrangements had been made for the Cubans. The refugee camp is spartan and divided into separate areas for single men and families.

The specter of another Mariel boatlift was a major factor in Clinton's decision to quickly adjust U.S. policy toward Cuban refugees.

At the time of the Mariel boatlift, Castro urged people to leave, including criminals and mental patients. The wave of refugees overwhelmed Florida social services and triggered a crime wave, damaging the state's tourist business.

Clinton's own experience with Mariel turned out to be politically disastrous.

In 1980, the federal government sent 19,000 Mariel refugees awaiting processing to Fort Chaffee, a National Guard base in northwestern Arkansas.

Fort Chaffee was the site of numerous demonstrations by restless Cubans. In late May of that year, hundreds of refugees rioted at Fort Chaffee and tried to storm a nearby town, but were turned back by state troopers, who beat them with billy clubs. Clinton alerted the National Guard and asked for military help from Washington.

Then-President Jimmy Carter sent 10,000 more Cubans to Fort Chaffee in August.

Clinton's political opponent, Frank White, hit hard on the Fort Chaffee situation, saying that Clinton failed to "stand up for Arkansas" and rebuke Carter when he sent more refugees to Arkansas. In November, Clinton was defeated by White, who had never run for office before.

Graphic

PHOTO;

PHOTO (1)

1. Cuban refugee Fernando Fernandez (left), who arrived in Florida before the change in U.S. policy took effect, shakes hands with a well-wisher through the fence at a Miami processing center. (Associated Press, DANIEL PORTNOY)

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