

U.S., Cuba Agree on Stemming Raft Tide

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Byline: Roberto Suro, Washington Post Staff Writer

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Body

The **United States** and **Cuba** signed an agreement today in which Washington pledged to accept a minimum of 20,000 legal immigrants a year from **Cuba**, and Havana promised in exchange to use every means possible to prevent its citizens from leaving its shores on **rafts**.

The deal was reached after eight days of negotiations sought by the Clinton administration to end a surge last month in the uncontrolled flight of thousands of Cubans seeking to reach Florida in makeshift vessels.

Without spelling out how **Cuba** would stop the exodus, the accord says Havana will use "mainly persuasive methods."

In **Cuba** after the accord was announced, government patrol boats were deployed near the coast of Havana, apparently to discourage rafters from departing, Washington Post correspondent Tod Robberson reported.

But in the resort of Cojimar east of the capital, hundreds of Cubans rushed to launch hastily constructed **rafts** in advance of the anticipated government crackdown on such departures. Police stayed far away from launch sites, and no patrol boats were seen off the shore in the evening. [Details on Page A18.]

The agreement marked the first time in 10 years that the **United States** and **Cuba** have successfully negotiated a substantial diplomatic accord. The **U.S.** side said the talks were strictly limited to migration issues, as Washington had wanted, and that there were no plans to undertake further discussions on the broad range of economic and political disputes between the nations.

At a news conference in Washington, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff said, "the **United States** continues to believe, as it has over the past three decades, that there should be a peaceful transition to democracy in **Cuba**. We will continue to work to that end."

But it is up to Cuban President Fidel Castro to take the first steps, Tarnoff said: "It will not hasten political and economic reform in **Cuba** for the **United States** to negotiate the terms and conditions of change in that country with its unelected government over the heads of the Cuban people."

U.S. action to implement the agreement, by increasing legal immigration from **Cuba**, will depend on the human traffic across the Straits of Florida, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Skol, the chief **U.S.** negotiator.

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[In Havana tonight, the Cuban government issued a statement urging people to stop setting out to sea, Reuter reported. The statement gave rafters 72 hours from midday Saturday to clear beaches of rafts and other material gathered for departure. During this period no arrests would be made of rafters, nor would their vessels or boat material be confiscated, the statement said.]

In announcing the agreement at a news conference in New York this afternoon, Skol said, "The credibility of this commitment on the part of the Cuban government will be judged on its willingness to take effective action to prevent irregular departures and on the actual number of migrants in the weeks and months ahead."

The joint communique states, "The Republic of Cuba will take effective measures in every way it possibly can to prevent unsafe departures using mainly persuasive methods."

Skol said there was no discussion with the Cubans on what specific measures they would take to stop the rafters, but he added, "we expect and assume that these people will be treated in a humane manner."

So far this year the Coast Guard has picked up almost 35,000 Cuban rafters, including 9,000 this month. With bad weather closing in on Cuba, only 168 rafters were picked up as of 10 p.m. today, the U.S. Coast Guard said.

Under today's agreement the United States will continue to take rafters picked up at sea to the U.S.-leased naval base at Guantanamo Bay in southeastern Cuba, and to other safe havens, with no prospect that they may directly apply for admission to the United States.

They will be offered the opportunity to return to Cuba and apply for legal immigration there. Nearly 25,000 Cubans are already housed at Guantanamo Bay.

The pact promises to greatly increase the number of Cubans allowed to enter the United States legally through the use of the attorney general's sweeping powers to "parole" people into the country. According to Immigration and Naturalization Commissioner Doris Meissner, 9,000 to 10,000 Cubans a year would benefit from the parole program even though they might not otherwise qualify for admission under existing immigration and refugee programs.

According to a senior State Department official, the breakthrough that produced the agreement occurred this morning when the chief Cuban negotiator, Ricardo Alarcon, dropped two demands: that the United States rescind measures tightening the economic embargo on Cuba announced by President Clinton Aug. 20, and that the U.S. government restrict "hostile" radio broadcasts beamed at Cuba from Florida.

The two demands had been formally presented by Cuba on Tuesday, leading U.S. officials to warn that the talks could collapse if Cuba insisted on discussing the issues. The United States refused to put them on the agenda for the talks at Wednesday's negotiating session, which ended when Alarcon announced that he needed to return to Havana for consultations, the U.S. official said.

When Alarcon returned to the New York talks today, presumably after discussions with Castro, the demand to broaden the negotiations beyond issues strictly related to the migration crisis had been dropped from the Cuban position, the U.S. official said.

The bargain reached today involved concessions from both sides.

Castro repeatedly had insisted that there could be no solution to the problem of illegal migration from Cuba unless the United States agreed to discuss an eventual end to its economic embargo of more than three decades against the island. Accepting an agreement strictly limited to migration issues represents a concession on a major principle for Castro.

"They are banking on the fact that within the United States there is a substantial body of opinion favoring a more flexible policy with Cuba," a senior State Department official said. "The Cubans apparently feel they will earn some good will with this, plus Castro may have decided that it no longer benefits him to have daily television pictures of people so desperate to leave his country that they will risk their lives on rafts."

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Also, Castro now will have to rescind orders issued to the Cuban authorities Aug. 12 instructing them not to interfere with people seeking to leave the island illegally.

The United States gave in to Castro's insistence that Washington had failed to live up to a migration agreement signed in 1984 that was supposed to produce a substantial movement of legal immigrants from Cuba. The agreement projected a maximum of 20,000 legal migrants a year, but the actual number has rarely exceeded 2,000.

Today's agreement marks the first time that the United States has ever guaranteed any nation that it would take a minimum number of immigrants even if the applicants did not qualify under standards set by Congress. It was also the first time that the prospect of increased legal immigration was exchanged for efforts to cut an illegal flow of people to the United States.

Staff writer Guy Gugliotta in Washington contributed to this report.

Graphic

CHART, EBB AND FLOW OF CUBAN RAFTERS (CHART IS NOT AVAILABLE.), TWP

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