

U.S., Cuba Interrupt Migration Discussion; Negotiator to Consult Castro on Limits of Talks

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Byline: Daniel Williams, Washington Post Staff Writer

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Body

The **United States** and **Cuba** today suspended **talks** over the refugee exodus from the island as Washington insisted that Havana give up its demand for an easing of the **U.S.** trade embargo against **Cuba**.

Top Cuban **negotiator** Ricardo Alarcon returned to Havana to **consult** with President Fidel **Castro**. The State Department said the **talks** could resume as early as Friday, but **U.S.** officials warned that divisions remain over significant issues.

Two major sticking points are **Cuba's** demands that Washington cancel recent measures to tighten the **U.S.** trade embargo against the island, and that it muzzle anti-**Castro** radio broadcasts from Miami to **Cuba**, a **U.S.** official said.

At a 45-minute meeting this morning before the **talks** were adjourned, **U.S.** chief **negotiator** Michael Skol asked Alarcon to drop those two demands from the latest Cuban proposal received Tuesday.

Alarcon told Skol he would have to **consult** directly in Havana to see if negotiations could continue on that basis, a **U.S.** official said.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher said the **interruption** in the **talks** was "not by any means a breakdown." Instead, he told reporters in Washington, the suspension "is part of the useful **talks** that are taking place."

The trade measures and radio broadcasts are problems because the **United States** has insisted that the **talks**, which began last Thursday, focus only on **migration** issues and not on the trade ban and other topics the Cubans would like to discuss.

Even if **Cuba** drops those two demands, the two sides would have to work out precise agreements on details of a deal in which the **United States** would increase legal immigration from **Cuba**. In exchange, **Castro's** government would take steps to stem the exodus of illegal migrants setting out on rafts and other makeshift vessels from **Cuba** to Florida.

Agreement would have to be reached on the number of **U.S.** visas to be granted to Cuban migrants, and on what categories of people would be eligible as relatives of **U.S.** residents and as candidates for political asylum.

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However, the gap between the sides has narrowed in one important respect. Cuba has dropped a demand that Washington find a way to let in a backlog of about 140,000 Cubans who Havana insists have been unfairly denied visas to the United States during the past 10 years, a U.S. official said.

That number was far too high for the United States to accept. In the meeting today, Skol gave Alarcon the latest version of a U.S. proposal to guarantee a minimum of 20,000 visas for Cuban migrants yearly, if Castro turns back rafters trying to float to Florida.

Skol, who returned to Washington, also told Alarcon "what's possible to get in the talks and what's not possible," a U.S. official said.

The pace of the continuing Cuban exodus was uncertain, as the Coast Guard reported that it had picked up 990 rafters by 10 p.m. today and officials predicted that the number for the day would exceed 1,000 -- an increase from Tuesday's total of 689, which was down significantly from the preceding day even though weather was clear.

President Clinton has kept most of the refugees from reaching the United States by ordering the Coast Guard to intercept them and take them to the U.S.-leased naval base at Guantanamo Bay in southeastern Cuba.

The possibility of a continuing stream of refugees could make the policy unmanageable, although Clinton has won agreement from Panama and other countries to provide refuge for the Cubans for periods of up to six months.

The U.S. negotiators came to New York last week armed with unprecedented concessions on immigration: They would guarantee a minimum number of visas for Cubans yearly. It was an answer to a longtime complaint from Castro that the United States owed the visas, because of Washington's hostile attitude toward his regime and enticements for Cubans to migrate by granting them political asylum.

But the Cuban negotiators are asking not only for concessions on migration, but also for political advantage on other issues in dealings with the United States. In effect, the missions of Skol and Alarcon are conflicting. Skol was ordered to talk about nothing other than migration, and Alarcon to talk about everything in addition to migration.

According to a member of the Cuban delegation, Alarcon has called on Washington to reverse a recent decision to ban cash gifts from exiles to relatives in Cuba, and to severely restrict travel. He also has proposed that the United States restrict anti-Castro radio broadcasts that reach Cuba and, in Havana's view, incite rafters to leave the island. Cuba is demanding that Washington muzzle both the U.S. government's Radio Marti and commercial broadcasters.

Any concession by the Clinton administration on either of those issues would be certain to draw harsh criticism from Florida's Cuban American community.

Havana has called for prosecution and conviction of Cubans who use force to hijack boats to leave Cuba. It also has proposed that a final communique mention the trade ban as a factor in migration pressures and provide a signal that talks on the embargo would take place later.

In recent days, Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, a member of the delegation, has said that Cuba is flexible and could "imagine" a migration agreement in which the embargo issue was deferred for later talks. However, it seems clear that the U.S. side misread Alarcon's early insistence on talking about trade, which it characterized as pro forma rather than central to his presentations.

Clinton's concessions on immigration already are substantial; no such guarantee of migration has been offered to any other nationality. Castro, on the other hand, has problems beyond the pressure of Cubans to leave. His program of attracting foreign investors is crippled by Cuba's lack of access to U.S. markets and tourist dollars. To settle simply for a migration accord, however generous, leaves his economic problems unresolved.

Graphic

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