

## **For Cubans Trying to Leave Legally, 'Lamentations'**

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**Byline:** By TIM GOLDEN,

By TIM GOLDEN, Special to The New York Times

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### **Body**

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Just beyond the green-glass offices of the American mission here, a few hundred yards from the seas dotted with the rafts of fleeing **Cubans**, scores of people gather each morning on a small patch of gravel and cement known as the Park of **Lamentations**.

Sitting in the shade of almond trees, they have become a steady reminder of how difficult it is for **Cubans** to travel to the United States by legal means. They are all waiting to see about visas, and under the current procedures, they may keep on waiting for months or even years.

"I don't want to throw myself into the sea, but what else can you do?" said Jose Miguel Gomez, a young man in the park who said he had been left behind as one of his siblings after another had left the country in rafts. "You can sit here a long time and nothing happens."

If successful, the negotiations that Cuban and American officials plan to begin on Thursday in New York may not help the raft refugees but could deliver some of "the **Lamenting** Ones." United States officials say they will offer to quicken the flow of legal immigrants in return for renewed efforts by the Cuban Government to stop those who, as it is said here, "throw themselves into the sea."

#### More Emigration Seen

Yet after days in which thousands of **Cubans** have braved sharks and storms in the hope of a better future -- many of them knowing that their best fate might be rescue by the United States Coast Guard and internment at the American naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba -- many diplomats and other analysts have grown skeptical that such a deal would relieve the growing pressure for emigration.

"If there is a migration deal that satisfies 20,000, there will be 200,000 who want to go," a diplomat said. Speaking of Cuba's President, Fidel Castro, he added, "He will not be able to stop people from **leaving** now without using force and drawing blood, and I don't think he is going to do that."

Analysts perceive varying degrees of intensity in the desperation that is driving the refugees from the island. But they generally agree that the economic suffering and political discontent that have caused the exodus will not decline significantly over the next several years, barring an unexpected reversal of Government policies.

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Legal and illegal immigration are also very different escape valves.

Most of the people taking to sea without visas are young men in their 20's and 30's, starkly pessimistic about their futures and often without family in the United States.

Seen as 'Almost Undesirable'

Describing them as largely less employed and less educated than other members of their generation, a Cuban official called them "almost undesirable" -- an allusion to the several thousand criminals and psychiatric patients sent to the United States among more than 125,000 Cubans in the Mariel boatlift in 1980.

Among some 19,700 Cubans awaiting action on immigrant visa requests, the average age is closer to 50, United States immigration officials say. Relatively few of them represent potential raft escapees or important threats to the governing Communist Party. And when they pass through the system, American officials suggest, there may not be that many more qualified applicants behind them.

Only three weeks ago, in an interview on Cuban television, Mr. Castro dismissed talks on immigration as a pointless exercise that "would be a pastime taking up months, years in order to accomplish absolutely nothing."

"It is not a question of getting 1,000 or 10,000 or so extra visas and establishing communication between Coast Guards," he said. "None of these things get to the bottom of the problem."

But since the Clinton Administration abruptly ended the longstanding policy of accepting illegal Cuban immigrants, the Havana Government has seemed to focus more on the claim that the United States has reneged on a 1984 agreement that set an annual ceiling of 20,000 legal Cuban immigrants.

Misinterpretation Seen

American officials respond that Cuba misinterpreted the accord.

Rather than a commitment or quota for any specific number of immigrant visas, they say, the figure -- which has since been raised to 27,845 -- was merely an upper limit that put Cubans on equal footing with other preferred countries.

The answer to why the United States Interests Section has granted only 2,059 immigrant visas over the last 10 months and even fewer in some recent years depends on who is asked.

Around of Park of Lamentations, which American diplomats prefer to call Liberty Park, there seems to be little question that the United States immigration authorities are making things tougher than necessary, perhaps to make them tougher for the Cuban Government.

"Maybe 300 people go in there every day," Gloria Ventana, a retired clerical worker, said, gesturing toward the United States mission. "The most they will ever give out are two or three visas!"

The diplomats say part of the problem is simply that with only seven consular officers, the mission is overwhelmed by a flow of paper that included more than 72,000 applications for non-immigrant visas in the fiscal year that ended in the fall of 1993.

## Graphic

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## For Cubans Trying to Leave Legally, 'Lamentations'

Photo: Weary of their long wait, **Cubans** seeking American visas sat yesterday in the Park of **Lamentations** near the United States mission in Havana. (The New York Times)

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