

Refugees drain Florida resources / 'Silent invasion' puts state in caring vs. cost quandary

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Body

As constant as the waves, they come: **Refugees** from Haiti and Cuba, swept by poverty and politics on ocean currents to south Florida.

This "**silent** invasion" - though not as dramatic as the massive boatlifts that brought 100,000 Cubans to the USA in 1980 - is just as **draining** on state **resources** already stretched thin. Officials also face a new problem: Human smuggling. A boat captain accused in a scheme that left four Haitians dead is in court today.

The state, caught between concern for the **refugees** and finding the money for their health, education and welfare, has signaled a get-tough stance:

-- Gov. Lawton Chiles plans to sue to force the federal government to pick up its share of an estimated \$ 2 billion annual tab for immigrants.

"**Florida** has come out of the gate earliest and quickest in terms of taking legal action," says Dag Ryen, of the Council of State Governments.

-- The child welfare department says it's fed up with funding **refugees**. It wants to deny foster care to a handful of undocumented children - including a boy, 15, who came to **Florida** alone by boat after his father and brother were slain by the Haitian military.

Says lawyer Chris Zawisza, whose Miami Legal Services represents the boy: "They're choosing to close the door starting with the most vulnerable, children who have no parents."

Counters Jim Towey, head of **Florida's** Department of Health and Rehabilitational Services: "We'd love to care, but we want the feds to give us the money to do it."

With an annual budget of \$ 126 million for foster care, the quality of life for the 9,000 children in the program is already "the pits," says Towey. "The problem is not going away. The fact is that Haiti and Cuba are more unstable today than a year ago. Who's going to pay the price for that? **Florida**."

Zawisza, whose Polish grandparents immigrated to the USA as teens, is appealing the state's stance on foster care: "Immigrants have made this country, a couple of generations later we're saying, 'We made it, they can't.' "

Increasingly, Haitians are arriving via human smuggling rings: picked up in the Bahamas, charged up to \$ 2,000 a family, then dumped - often at gunpoint - off **Florida's** shores. A Boynton Beach, **Fla.**, boat captain Richard Bennett Barker, 43, faces up to 140 years in prison if convicted on the federal smuggling charge.

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Barker reportedly forced 27 Haitians off his 31-foot boat off the coast of Stuart, **Fla.**

For Haitian immigrant Blaise Augustin, each new drowning awakens an old pain. In 1979, he paid a smuggler \$ 1,000 to come to **Florida**.

The captain pulled a gun, forcing Augustin and 23 others to jump into 15-foot deep waters. Seven drowned.

"By the time they found the children, they were dead," says Augustin. "It makes me so sad in a Christian way. We are human beings."

In recent months, dozens of Haitian **refugees** have drowned. As many as 34 **Florida**-bound Haitians were feared dead in waters off the Bahamas after a smuggler's boat capsized Feb 19.

But the tragedies seem to have little effect on the steady stream. The Immigration and Naturalization Service says arrivals by sea or by air are up this year: in 1993, 4,100 Cubans and 2,546 Haitians arrived in **Florida**. Already this year: 581 Cubans and 400 Haitians.

Augustin, 39, works 12-hour days, seven days a week. In addition to providing counseling to St. Joseph's Haitian Catholic Center in Pompano Beach, **Fla.**, he's bought his own convenience store and put his three children in private school.

"People are looking for life. They're looking for freedom, and the U.S is the place to come," says Augustin. "If we can't come to the United States, where can we go?"

Coast Guard interceptions at sea

The government ordered the return of Haitians intercepted at sea to stem a **refugee** surge after Jean-Bertrand Aristide's overthrow in 1991.

	Cubans	Haitians
1989	391	3,368
1993	3,656	2,324

Notes

IMMIGRATION; See sidebar; 09A; See related story; 11A; See info box at end of text

Graphic

GRAPHIC, b/w, Sam Ward, USA TODAY, Source: U.S. Coast Guard (Line graph); PHOTO, b/w, Andrew Itkoff

Classification

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