

Florida Nearing Emergency As Cuban Exodus Increases

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Byline: By MIREYA NAVARRO,

By MIREYA NAVARRO, Special to The New York Times

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Body

Nearly 500 **Cuban** refugees were picked up off the **Florida** coast today, nudging state officials closer to declaring an immigration **emergency** that would include the mobilization of the National Guard and state workers to shelter, medically screen and transport large groups of people to relocation centers.

The Coast Guard said late tonight that 537 Cubans had arrived in **Florida** today, compared with 339 on Tuesday, 282 on Monday and 170 on Sunday. The daily numbers have steadily risen since the beginning of the year and are now the highest since the 1980 Mariel boatlift, which brought 125,200 Cubans to the United States in five months.

More than 6,400 **Cuban** refugees, mostly small groups on makeshift crafts, have made it to the United States since January, compared with 3,656 for all of 1993. Among those passing through the Transit Home for **Cuban** Refugees on Stock Island today was a 91-year-old woman who left Cuba with 16 others in a raft three days earlier.

A senior State Department official today attributed the **exodus** to a policy shift by President Fidel Castro of Cuba.

Policy Change on Rafters

"The reason this **increase** is happening is Castro has changed his policy on rafters," the official said. "He's still stopping big boats, but not rafters. He's stopping boats that are assets of value to Cuba. But he's not stopping people from leaving in rafts. This is a policy decision he took a week and a half ago."

But the official said the current influx was not Mariel II or a slow-motion Mariel.

"The principal characteristic of Mariel was a bunch of people took boats from **Florida** and picked up people in Cuba," the official said. "There is no sign at all of that happening."

Rafael Dausa, director of political affairs at the **Cuban** Interest Section in Washington, denied that there had been a change in policy by Havana but warned that unless the United States took measures to stop the refugee flow itself, "we will be in the position of not putting any obstacles" to the departures.

Among the measures he wants the United States to take, Mr. Dausa said, are lifting the economic embargo on Cuba and stopping radio broadcasts from Miami to Cuba.

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Both Federal and state officials said on Tuesday that they could still manage without putting into action emergency plans that include blocking vessels and mobilizing thousands of National Guard and state law-enforcement officers to transport large numbers of refugees to processing centers.

Governor Prods White House

Gov. Lawton Chiles called for "an expanded presence" of the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service in South Florida and a "comprehensive test" of the Federal plan to deal with a possible major influx.

Tonight, at a news conference in Key West, the Governor said the situation was "critically approachinhg an emergency," and added: "I'm insisting that the Federal Government prepare to invoke its emergency plan."

Mr. Chiles also said that he had been in touch with the White House and that he might make his request official on Thursday.

Ana Cobian, a spokeswoman for the Justice Department, said that more personnel from both agencies had already been deployed, and that it was adequate for the current needs. She declined to describe the extent of the increase in personnel.

State officials were poised to activate an emergency plan that would dispatch thousands of National Guardsmen and law-enforcement officers to pick up Cuban refugees and take them to temporary reception centers, and then to Homestead Air Force Base south of here for relocation out of state. The plan is meant to support a Federal response for the first 72 hours of the emergency.

'No Magic Number' Needed

But the officials said there was no particular number of refugees to be reached before putting the plan into effect.

"There's no magic number; it varies from county to county," said Eric Tolbert, bureau chief of the Division of Emergency Management in the Florida Department of Community Affairs.

In Dade County, where most Cuban refugees have historically settled, officials were more worried about long-term effects. On Tuesday they asked Attorney General Janet Reno for emergency immigration money for housing, health care and public safety from a \$35 million Federal fund that is expected to increase soon to \$75 million.

State officials, who have also asked for Federal aid, put the cost to Florida at \$1 billion.

As they arrive in increasing numbers, the refugees say they risked dehydration and sharks to escape repression and misery in Cuba. Many said they were prompted to flee by a Government crackdown on the black market, which they say they had relied on for food.

Today the Coast Guard brought in a body on a raft found off Miami. Lieut. Comdr. Jim Howe, a Coast Guard spokesman in Miami, said a pleasure boat spotted the raft that was carrying one dead man and a male companion who survived the trip but was later hospitalized.

Scrambling for Supplies

Refugees said today that despite the risks, many in Cuba were scrambling for supplies to make the 90-mile trip across the Florida Straits to Key West.

A group of 28 Cubans from Villa Clara province said each person in the group of four families and a few friends played a role in making a 22-foot boat in three weeks: one man stole aluminum irrigation pipes from the sugar cane field where he worked to fashion the boat's hull, another bought or traded gathered spare parts and rebuilt the boat's engine from a 1956 Ford.

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Most refugees stay with relatives, said workers with the United States Catholic Conference, which helps resettle them. Those who are alone are put into motels until they get their working papers in order. Most are relocated out of state to job markets that offer work in hotels, restaurants and construction.

Today some of the new arrivals who had been moved into motels in Miami spent the time contacting out-of-state relatives by telephone, watching television or simply sitting out near the street.

Graphic

Photo: The flow of Cuban refugees brought Federal and state officials closer to an immigration emergency yesterday after nearly 500 Cubans were picked up off the Florida coast. At the Coast Guard station in Miami Beach, a guardsman lifted a child from the cutter Manitou, which picked up a total of 47 refugees yesterday. (Associated Press)

Map of FLorida showing location of Key West.

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