

U.S. Announces Plan Relaxing Visa Restrictions for Cuban Immigrants

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Body

The Clinton administration **announced** details yesterday of a migration **plan** solely for Cuba that will permit at least 20,000 **immigrants** to enter the **United States** each year, including about 6,000 chosen by lottery.

The administration expects more than 24,000 Cubans to arrive under the **plan** during the first year, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Skol said.

The **plan** grew out of a **U.S.** pledge to increase the number of **visas** granted in return for action by the government of Fidel Castro to stop citizens fleeing the country by raft and boat. An uncontrolled exodus from the Communist-ruled isle resulted in more than 30,000 rafters being picked up at sea.

More than 25,000 Cubans are living in a tent city at the **U.S.** naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and 6,128 others have been ferried to Panama, where an internment camp was set up with a capacity for 10,000. All are being encouraged to return to Cuba and try their luck at both eased immigration rules and the lottery.

Only about 225 detainees have asked to return to Cuba, and 17 have been given permission by Havana to reenter.

The refugees' reluctance to go home is becoming a stain on the Clinton administration, which ended more than 30 years of welcome to refugees from Communism. **Cuban** American groups in Miami have begun to demonstrate for admission of all the refugees into the **United States**.

"The type of **Cuban** who was desperate, desperate enough to take unsafe rafts ... to the **United States**, possibly because he or she didn't have any other legal hope to get to the **United States** ... he or she too will have an opportunity to legally migrate," Skol told reporters. "That is the reason for the lottery."

The administration also is expanding the categories of applicants who qualify for migration as refugees, Skol said. The usual definition of someone with a well-founded fear of persecution will be more loosely applied to ex-political prisoners, members of persecuted religious minorities, human rights activists and people who face discrimination for political beliefs.

"The original concept was political prisoners only. We are expanding that definition," Skol said.

Officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service estimate that about 6,000 Cubans will qualify for refugee status annually, another 8,000 or 9,000 for normal immigration to the **United States** and the rest by lot. The higher number for the first year is due to a backlog of migrants who are on a waiting list built up over past years who are going to be let in quickly.

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The deal with Cuba over migration effectively ended the refugee crisis. President Clinton averted an uncontrolled **Cuban** exodus into Florida in the months leading up to elections. In this political season, immigration is a nationwide issue, with Americans much less tolerant of waves of newcomers than in the recent past.

Clinton, who said that Castro would not dictate his immigration policy, twice gave in to demands from the aging dictator: first, in declaring that Cubans who tried to arrive by sea would no longer automatically be considered refugees; second, by guaranteeing 20,000 **visas** annually for Cubans. **U.S.** officials, answering a complaint that **visas** were issued too slowly in Havana, denied that the speed of processing for Cubans was different than for anyone else.

Castro still wants talks on ending the long **U.S.** ban on trade with the island. Clinton has resisted that demand.

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