

# **Coast Guard to Stop Vessels Bound for Cuba; Reno Issues Warning to Head Off Exodus After Refugee Boat Is Reported in Florida Straits**

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## **Body**

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Alarmed that at least one boat left Florida for Cuba and brought back refugees this week, Attorney General Janet Reno warned yesterday that the Coast Guard will stop, inspect and impound boats in the Florida Straits that appear headed for the island.

The warning, issued in an unusual evening news conference, highlighted the importance placed by the Clinton administration on preventive measures to head off a potential massive boatlift of Cubans to Florida. Cuban President Fidel Castro recently threatened to let citizens of his country flee by sea and to open his coasts to exiles from the United States who want to pick up relatives and friends.

"We want to take all steps that are prudent, that are consistent with our policy, to ensure that that does not happen," Reno said.

The prospect of an exodus of the magnitude of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, in which 125,000 Cubans crossed the straits separating Cuba from Florida, has set off a series of administration steps to nip any movement in the bud. Most of the Cubans who migrated during the Mariel incident were picked up by exiles from Florida and brought back.

A senior administration official said the Reno announcement was meant to be a "preemptive message" aimed at persuading Cuban Americans not to head to Cuba to pick up relatives.

A few hours after Reno's announcement in Washington, Castro held an equally unusual late-night news conference in Havana. In remarks apparently directed toward an international audience, he denounced U.S. immigration policy he says denies Cubans the right to come legally to the United States and instead encourages them to take to the seas in unseaworthy rafts and hijacked boats. But he did not directly threaten another Mariel boatlift.

Castro also said a Cuban navy boat whose 26 passengers arrived in Key West Wednesday was hijacked, and that Leonel Macias Gonzalez, a Cuban soldier being detained by U.S. immigration officials, shot and killed a Cuban navy lieutenant during the hijacking at the port of Mariel in Cuba.

Castro said that the dead lieutenant's body, shot in the head and abdomen, was recovered from the waters, although the body has not been publicly shown in Cuba. He called Gonzalez "an assassin."

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"Macias Gonzalez takes a revolver from a bag, shooting the officer twice by surprise, and at the rear of the ship, he fell into the water, mortally wounded, according to the statements of the crew," Castro said. "He was hit in the abdomen and head in a traitorous way, by surprise."

Macias Gonzalez's fellow refugees said Wednesday that there was an exchange of gunfire and that he shot in self-defense. They called him a hero.

During a long, mostly calm speech in front of a handful of journalists in Havana, Castro also attacked the long-running U.S. economic blockade against Cuba, which Castro said was the cause of his island's troubles and behind the current wave of illegal immigration.

A U.S. official said that Customs officials in Florida had discovered one boat that had left Florida, picked up refugees in Cuba and returned. Customs officers arrested three men who docked their speedboat at Ocean Resort in Key Largo, after receiving a tip that the boat had smuggled 20 refugees into the country. The refugees were being held at a Coast Guard station before transfer to Miami.

Another boat also was reported to have made the crossing, although that report remained unconfirmed. In any event, the administration "decided we needed to send a clear message that we were serious" about stopping it, a senior official said.

Administration officials held discussions yesterday with Cuban American leaders and remain convinced that Cuban exiles support the policy of resisting crossings to Cuba. The one or two boats were an aberration, an official added, but "we believed it was prudent" to both seize the one boat and to issue a warning in Washington.

In Miami, Cuban American leaders continued to call for calm, urging their constituents not to leap into boats for a ride to Cuba to rescue family or friends.

One U.S. official said Reno's news conference was scheduled before Castro's news conference plans were known, although another said that the expected Castro speech did play a role.

"We thought it wise to lay down a marker," an administration official said.

Cuba is pressing the United States to stop granting automatic asylum to boat people and to let more refugees into the country legally, noting that the maximum 20,000 annual U.S. immigration quota is rarely, if ever, filled.

At a news conference on Monday, Alfonso Fraga, Cuba's top diplomat in Washington, repeated Castro's charge that Washington's policy of granting the refugees automatic political asylum encourages the exodus.

U.S. immigration officials concede that far fewer Cubans migrate through the legal channels available at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana than could under the 20,000 annual ceiling. Only about 5,000 Cubans are granted visas there, a U.S. official said.

Staff writer William Booth in Miami contributed to this report.

## Graphic

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PHOTO, JANET RENO

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