

U.S. Urges Cuba to Lower Emigres' Fees

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Body

The **United States urged Cuba** today to **lower** exit **fees** for those wishing to migrate but said bilateral agreements on immigration are working, despite recent evidence of organized human smuggling.

The two countries held their ninth round of talks since 1994 on implementing agreements whereby the **United States** turns back most illegal "rafters" trying to reach American shores but takes 20,000 immigrants a year who apply through legal channels.

"In the main, the agreements are working," said John Hamilton, deputy assistant secretary of state for Central America, the Caribbean and **Cuba**, who conducted the talks with Ricardo Alarcon, **Cuba's** parliamentary president.

"Illegal migration attempts across the Florida Straits -- even with the recent alien smuggling -- are at historically **low** levels," Hamilton said. Coast Guard crews have rescued 102 migrants at sea so far this month in a summer influx of fleeing Cubans.

But Hamilton said the high **fees** associated with various steps of the immigration process in **Cuba** led many Cubans to abandon the effort to leave the island legally.

In recent months, **U.S.** authorities say that smuggling rings dropping migrants off in fast boats appear to be behind most attempts to flee, unlike in previous years, when Cubans often put to sea in rafts or leaky boats in risky individual efforts.

Alarcon did not address the news media after the talks conducted at the **U.S.** Mission to the United Nations, across the street from **U.N.** headquarters.

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