

U.S. Is in a Quandary as Chinese Wait Off Shore

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Body

Ten days after the Coast Guard stopped three ships trying to smuggle 659 **Chinese** into California, senior officials in the Clinton Administration continued to argue over solutions -- none attractive -- to the increasingly difficult and embarrassing situation.

As the **United States** continued to press the Mexican Government to accept the refugees, the crowded, fetid ships remained about 100 miles southwest of San Diego, surrounded by Coast Guard cutters.

The ships represent the first test of the Clinton Administration's vow to crack down on illegal immigration, a vow made after another smuggler's ship, the Golden Venture, spilled nearly 300 illegal **Chinese** immigrants onto New York's **shores** last month.

Even as it wavered over action on the three ships, the Administration said today that it would back tough new legislation on asylum seekers.

Ejected the Same Day

The measure will allow quick and summary hearings for people who request asylum at airports and other ports of entry, and would stiffen penalties against alien smugglers.

Government officials and others familiar with the plan say it includes charging alien smugglers under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. As a result it will allow Federal prosecutors to seize the assets of smugglers, including ships like the Golden Venture.

Under the bill, a corps of immigration officers will screen aliens caught trying to enter the country without proper documents to determine if their asylum claims are worthy to be heard by an immigration judge. Those whose claims are deemed frivolous could be placed on airplanes and sent back to their country of origin on the same day they arrived in the **United States**.

Under current immigration law, an alien's statement that he has a well-founded fear of persecution is generally sufficient to allow him to be scheduled for a hearing. The hearing process can take years, during which the applicant is generally allowed to stay in the **United States**.

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Immigration experts say that in 1992 about 14,000 people tried to enter the country without documents or by using fraudulent documents and then claimed asylum. A sizeable percentage of them turned up at Kennedy International Airport in New York, the experts said.

Unpleasant Alternatives

The bill, which is to be announced when President Clinton returns to Washington, was drafted by Congressional staffs and an interagency task force made up of officials from the Justice Department, the State Department, the Office of Management and Budget and the White House.

For the last 10 days, senior officials of the Departments of State, Defense, Justice and Transportation and the Central Intelligence Agency have been struggling with the problem of the three ships off Mexico. The officials are considering these alternatives, immigration officials said:

*Allow the refugees into the United States and hear their pleas for political asylum. State Department and immigration service officials vow they will not let that happen.

*Dragoon the refugees onto a United States Navy vessel and ship them back to China. But the Navy wants no part of that plan, immigration officials said.

*Force the home nation of the freighters to take their human cargo. No one is sure of the ships' true flags; two of the ships claimed Taiwanese registry, an assertion the Government of Taiwan denies.

'U.S.A. I Love You'

The United States imposed a news blackout on the ships today, keeping the faces of the Chinese passengers waving signs -- "USA I Love You" and "Bread We Want, Freedom We Want" -- off television and out of the newspapers.

No responsible official would comment publicly on the stranded refugees, the so-far fruitless talks with the Mexican Government or the implications for the new policy of preventing boatloads of immigrants from applying for political asylum.

The State Department spokesman, Michael McCurry, said it was "obvious that this is a sensitive matter of diplomacy." He also said it was "being addressed with urgency on the part of the officials here in the United States that are dealing with it," and added, "We remain in contact with the Mexican Government" on the issue of Mexico's accepting the refugees.

Such contacts were at best strained. Senior Mexican officials insisted that they would not take on the immigration problems of the United States, and expressed fury at the way the situation has been handled.

A Backlog of Applications

Simply put, the Administration wants to prevent the Chinese refugees aboard the ship from applying for political asylum in the United States. The system has due-process requirements and legal protections that can take months and years to fulfill. It is hard-pressed to handle its backlog of applications: 10,000 new requests a month, and 300,000 people on a waiting list.

The United States also wants to prevent a repeat of the June 6 wreck of the Golden Venture, in which 10 Chinese died trying to swim ashore. All but 14 of the 301 illegal immigrants who survived the beaching are still being detained in Immigration and Naturalization Service prisons in Pennsylvania and Louisiana, an I.N.S. spokeswoman said yesterday.

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By intercepting the three ships at sea, the United States aims to send a signal that might stop tens of thousands of Chinese people from paying smugglers tens of thousands of dollars apiece to take them to the United States in the filthy holds of freighters.

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