

U.S. Asks Mexico to Accept 659 Chinese Detained at Sea

The Washington Post

July 9, 1993, Friday, Final Edition

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Section: FIRST SECTION; PAGE A1; NATIONAL NEWS, FOREIGN NEWS

Length: 858 words

Byline: Ann Devroy, Al Kamen, Washington Post Staff Writers

Series: Occasional

Body

The Clinton administration last night decided to ask the government of Mexico to accept 659 Chinese detained at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard and allow the United Nations to process their asylum claims.

The action comes three weeks after President Clinton announced new efforts to curb the smuggling of illegal Chinese immigrants into the United States. The Chinese were detained on three rundown freighters in the Pacific Ocean Tuesday.

The ships, boarded by U.S. authorities in international waters off the Mexican coast, were moved to an area 70 miles southwest of San Diego while the administration struggled over what to do with them in line with Clinton's s new policy.

A senior official said an interagency task force last night recommended to Clinton that Mexico be asked to allow the Chinese on their territory and that the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees be asked to determine how many, if any, deserve asylum status.

The recommendation, approved by Clinton in Japan, where he is attending the economic summit, is aimed at keeping the immigrants out of U.S. territory because their appeals for political asylum processed here would take longer, cost taxpayers more in detention expenses and probably be treated more leniently, officials said.

Since Wednesday morning, when the boarding procedures were complete, officials in Washington, under the supervision of Vice President Gore in Clinton's s absence, had been "trying to figure out what to do because there are no easy options." Another official said, "There are complexities because they are not in our jurisdiction. They are not here yet."

Clinton pledged June 18 to allow the Coast Guard wide leeway to go into international waters to board ships suspected of carrying illegal Chinese migrants, and officials said the boarding was the first strong example of that. He reaffirmed an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) policy, adopted a few weeks earlier, calling for mandatory detention of Chinese immigrants illegally smuggled into the United States by organized crime rings.

The detention, until asylum or deportation decisions are made, is supposed to deter Chinese migrants from trying to come to the United States, but it occurs only if they actually land on U.S. territory. In this case, officials are attempting to avoid having the immigrants treated under U.S. law, which allows, for example, asylum based on a claim of persecution under China's s one-child population-control policy.

Officials said last night their initial determination is that most of the 659 are connected to the organized crime rings. Among the evidence is the assertion by the boat captains that they were sailing under the flag of Taiwan when that

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country, after a daylong check, could not confirm that. The ships, one official said, amount to "pirate" ships because they violate international law on country of registry.

In Los Angeles, Virginia Kice of the regional INS office, said, "Our intent is to keep them in international waters until a decision can be reached."

The INS estimated in June that 100,000 illegal Chinese immigrants enter the United States each year, mostly by boat. The issue gained widespread publicity last month when a freighter carrying illegal Chinese immigrants was grounded in waters off Queens in New York and several immigrants drowned trying to swim ashore.

The increase in Chinese taking to sea to reach the United States parallels an increase in the migrant population worldwide, which last year reached 100 million people, according to a U.N. report. That number included 37 million people fleeing war, political strife, violence or drought.

The United States is not alone in seeking policies to manage the flow. European governments, too, have been inundated by migrants from the former Soviet Union and, more recently, the former Yugoslavia.

Clinton has come under criticism recently for taking months to name a new INS director and to revise U.S. immigration policy. Earlier, he was sharply criticized for reversing his campaign stand and continuing the Bush administration policy of returning Haitians attempting to flee to the United States by boat.

He announced a new INS director on June 18 and outlined efforts to curb what officials say is a growing trade in Chinese immigrants by organized crime groups in China and Taiwan.

The crime rings charge massive fees to the immigrants, effectively requiring them to be indentured servants in the United States.

U.S. officials said yesterday that the three large freighters boarded this week did not appear to be part of a coordinated convoy. Almost all the 659 people aboard the vessels are males and have Chinese passports.

Coast Guard spokesman Tim Sullivan described the migrants as "not in bad condition." None has needed medical attention, he said.

Two of the ships attempted to evade Coast Guard boarding. One of the ship captains radioed a U.S. cutter, "I'm going to San Diego. I have food and fuel and water for three months. See you there." But the ship was stopped and boarded.

A third ship had lost power and was being towed by a U.S. vessel, Sullivan said.

Graphic

PHOTO, COAST GUARD CUTTER TYBEE STANDS BY DISABLED FREIGHTER HAULING IMMIGRANTS.
REUTER

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); ORGANIZED CRIME (89%); SMUGGLING (89%); DEPORTATION (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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(78%); POLITICAL DETAINEES (78%); REFUGEES (78%); INTERNATIONAL LAW (77%); UNITED NATIONS (77%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (77%); APPROVALS (71%)

Company: IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE UNITED NATIONS (91%); **UNITED STATES** COAST GUARD (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (59%)

Organization: US COAST GUARD (91%); US COAST GUARD (91%); UNITED NATIONS (84%); UNITED NATIONS (84%); UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (56%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE UNITED NATIONS (91%); **UNITED STATES** COAST GUARD (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (59%)

Person: BILL CLINTON (79%); AL GORE (58%)

Geographic: LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); PACIFIC OCEAN (79%); **UNITED STATES** (95%); **MEXICO** (93%); TAIWAN (79%); JAPAN (79%)

Load-Date: October 14, 1993