

Rescued Haitians held in Ga. while smuggling investigated

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Body

A group of **Haitians rescued** off the shore of Savannah Sunday night will remain in **Georgia while** immigration officials determine whether they were part of a scheme to **smuggle Haitians** into the United States.

A 2-year-old Haitian boy was dead on the boat when it arrived, and one woman temporarily suffered cardiac arrest.

Three **Haitians** remain hospitalized in Chatham County, **while** others in the group of 19 have been transported to Atlanta, said Tom Fischer, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service district director.

The group, which included two Bahamians and one Jamaican, apparently left Freeport for the United States and had been at sea at least a week in an 18-foot open boat. They were picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard 50 miles from the **Georgia** coast.

"One more day and they would have all been dead," Fischer said.

Keeping the **Haitians** on U.S. soil is at odds with U.S. policy, which says that Haitian boat people are not eligible to come to the United States. Over the summer, the U.S. Coast Guard routinely picked up Haitian boat people and sent them to the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The **Haitians** have to stay in a tent city there until their homeland is stabilized, and they can be returned home.

The **Haitians** will be paroled temporarily into the United States, in order to improve their physical and mental condition and for questioning in the INS **investigation**, according to Fischer.

"We believe there was an alien **smuggling** ring, and that they started off from the Bahamas somewhere. The two Bahamians are in jail in Chatham County, but no charges have yet been filed," Fischer said. "We're interviewing all the **Haitians**, trying to decide where they came from and how they got on that vessel."

The **Haitians** suffered from shock, dehydration and exposure when they arrived in **Georgia**. They have no documentation, Fischer said.

Haitian churches in the Atlanta area have been contacted for possible placement of the group.

"I am going to parole them into the country," Fischer said. "It's a temporary parole, to physically and mentally get them into a condition so they feel more comfortable assisting us with an **investigation**."

Graphic

Rescued Haitians held in Ga. while smuggling investigated

Photo: Dieuseul Jeropme-St. Louis and other Haitians are questioned. / FRANK NIEMEIR / Staff

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