

Officials Preparing For Athlete Defections; INS Increases Staff in Its Atlanta Office

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Body

On the second floor of the Immigration and Naturalization Service office here, a team of INS officials is set to handle any political asylum cases that may arise during the Olympic Games.

No one knows how many of the more than 10,000 athletes from 197 territories and nations who are expected to compete in the Games will try to seek political asylum. Already three members of the Cuban Olympic team have asked for asylum since leaving Cuba last month and before arriving in Atlanta.

On June 30, two Cuban boxers requested asylum after fleeing their training camp in Mexico and crossing the border in California near San Diego. Joel Casamayor, a 1992 Olympic gold medalist, and Ramon Garbey, a three-time world champion, said they have asked to defect to the United States because "they would rather die than fight for Fidel Castro," according to Al Rogers, a lawyer helping the boxers.

Bela Karolyi and his wife, Martha, both of whom defected to the United States from Romania in 1981, said that defections are difficult and that no one who defects knows what will happen afterward.

"It was a decision that we did because of the conditions in Romania," said Martha Karolyi, coach of the U.S. Olympic women's gymnastics team. "We feel very good about the decision because we started over here in gymnastics and we became successful. I think everybody has to analyze their own situation and make a decision."

Bela Karolyi said he and his wife didn't know what to expect when they defected at the end of a Romanian gymnastics team tour in New York. "I don't believe anybody who makes the decision [to defect] knows [what will happen], but whatever [happens] you better cope with it."

Jesse Ravelo, an assistant coach for the U.S. Olympic boxing team, is a former Cuban boxer who defected to the United States at the Pan American Games in Canada in 1967. At the time, he was 15 and his parents had legally moved to this country a few months prior to his defection.

"I understand what the athletes are doing," Ravelo said. "They are doing what's best for them. Like I did what was best for me."

Ravelo, who won the gold medal in the lightweight division at the Pan American Games before defecting, said he didn't want to comment further about the recent defections. "I don't want the Cubans to be reading all of this and believing that I am putting things in the athletes' heads on how I did it and why I did it," he said after a training session with the U.S. boxers.

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Last week, Rolando Arrojo, a star pitcher on the Cuban baseball team, left his team hotel in Albany, Ga., because he said he wants "to live in freedom" and fulfill his lifelong dream to play baseball in the United States. Joe Cubas, a sports agent who is representing Arrojo, said Arrojo is seeking asylum in the Dominican Republic, though Cubas didn't rule out the possibility of Arrojo applying for asylum in the United States.

In the past few years, dozens of Cuban athletes have defected after arriving in North America to participate in sports events. The largest contingent of Cuban defectors at one event occurred in 1993 at the Central American and Caribbean Games in Puerto Rico. As many as 50 athletes, more than 10 percent of the 450 Cuban athletes who competed in Puerto Rico, defected over a 10-day period. Several Cuban baseball players -- the most visible of the athletes because many later play in the major leagues -- have defected during exhibition games and competitions in the United States.

Castro last week called the three recent defectors traitors and urged the rest of the 1996 Cuban Olympic team to remain loyal to Cuba. About 170 Cuban athletes are expected to compete in Atlanta.

David E. Lewis, the lead officer for the INS asylum team here, has been detailed from Arlington, where he generally works.

Like Lewis, Pat Trubiano, a deputy director in the INS office in New York, also will be here through the Olympic Games. Trubiano said there are eight district offices throughout the country that process asylum cases and district officers frequently travel to various parts of the country to help with cases.

By federal law, asylum is granted "to qualified applicants who have suffered persecution in the past and/or who face a reasonable possibility of suffering persecution in the future if returned to their countries," according to a fact sheet published by the INS, an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. Asylum requests can be decided by asylum officers and immigration judges.

Organizers of this summer's Games said their volunteers and staff are prepared to help any foreign athletes who might ask for asylum.

"Our concern is always the well-being and rights of the athletes," said Martin Duffy, a spokesman for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG).

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