

CROSSINGS FROM MEXICO DWARF CUBAN EXODUS

San Jose Mercury News (California)

August 21, 1994 Sunday MORNING FINAL EDITION Correction Appended

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Section: FRONT; Pg. 27A

Length: 541 words

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Dateline: Washington

Body

The number of refugees who fled Cuba in boats last week does not represent even a busy day along the U.S. border with **Mexico**, where an average of 3,200 people are arrested daily for trying to enter this country illegally.

The U.S. Coast Guard picked up 2,000-plus people in the waters off Cuba last week, creating a near-crisis atmosphere in the Clinton administration.

Yet neither the administration nor Congress is treating the Mexican border breakdown, where about 1.1 million illegal entrants are caught every year, as anything like a crisis.

In reality, the numbers have little to do with the way the United States handles its twin immigration problems with **Mexico** and Cuba. The contrasts in policy are rooted in politics, history, geography and public perceptions.

And while President Clinton announced an abrupt end Friday to the policy that has granted easy asylum to Cubans, there's still a big difference from the policy with **Mexico**.

"The big difference is we are prepared to send Mexicans back to **Mexico** and we are not prepared to send Cubans back to Cuba," said Jack Martin, research director for the non-partisan Center for Immigration Studies.

Since the day in 1959 when Fidel Castro first took power, people fleeing Cuba have been viewed as political refugees from a repressive regime. Cubans have been given special legal treatment, too, notably the **Cuban** Adjustment Act of 1986, which essentially permits Cubans who can find their way here to stay here.

Cuba also has no formal diplomatic relations with the United States. It remains a last vestige of the Cold War, a communist nation in a world being swept by democracy, as Clinton reminded Americans during his news conference Friday.

Mexico, on the other hand, enjoys normal diplomatic relations with the United States. Despite the immigration problems, the United States considers the nation's government legitimate. Mexicans who try to come here illegally are driven by economic factors, not political considerations, and therefore are not eligible under U.S. law to stay.

The Clinton administration's newly announced policy to detain Cubans but not allow them to settle in the United States is aimed not only at discouraging Cubans from fleeing, but also at keeping the pressure on Castro.

Another key difference between the **Cuban** and Mexican situations is that Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles, a Democrat, threatened to call out the National Guard to deal with the boats landing on his state's beaches.

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Politicians in California have suggested deploying the National Guard along the Mexican border but have never pushed the matter -- in part, some privately acknowledge, because Mexico could view the move as a hostile act that would strain relations with the United States.

Martin said he had detected one link between the Cuban and Mexican immigration problems, one with potentially ominous implications.

"Mexicans in small but fast-growing numbers have been asking for asylum status in the United States (like the Cubans) because they've learned it's the way to get a work permit," Martin said. "That's a scary prospect, because if it ever became widespread, the current backlog of a half-million asylum applications could quickly double."

Correction

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 8/22/94, pg. 4A)

Because of a reporting error by the Mercury News Washington bureau, the year of the Cuban Adjustment Act was incorrectly stated Sunday. It was enacted in 1966.

Correction-Date: August 22, 1994

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); MIGRATION ISSUES (89%); POLITICS (88%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (78%); DIPLOMATIC SERVICES (78%); COLD WAR (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (78%); BEACHES (77%); ARRESTS (77%); DEMOCRACIES (76%); LEGISLATION (76%); FOREIGN RELATIONS (74%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (74%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (70%); PRESS CONFERENCES (68%); RESEARCH INSTITUTES (66%)

Organization: US COAST GUARD (58%); US COAST GUARD (58%)

Person: BILL CLINTON (79%); FIDEL CASTRO (58%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); MEXICO (97%); UNITED STATES (96%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: October 25, 2002