

Bush Remark Gives Advocates Hope for Release of Haitians

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Body

A day after President **Bush** said his administration would make sure that Haitian refugees were treated like all asylum seekers of other nationalities, immigration groups and Haitian **advocates** had mixed reactions about whether his **remarks** would soon lead to the **release** of hundreds of refugees being detained here.

Mr. **Bush** made the **remarks** at a news conference on Thursday. He said **Haitians** should be treated the same as all migrants, except Cubans. "And the difference, of course," he said. "is that we don't send people back to Cuba because they're going to be persecuted."

Mr. **Bush** added, "**Haitians** and everybody else ought to be treated the same way, and we're in the process of making sure that happens."

Under a **Bush** administration policy adopted in December, **Haitians** seeking asylum in the United States are held in indefinite detention during the processing of their immigration claims. Immigration **advocates** and a growing number of local and national lawmakers oppose the policy because it does not apply to migrants of any other nationality.

Debate over the issue was renewed last month when a boat carrying more than 200 **Haitians** ran aground in the shallow waters off the Miami shore. The **Haitians** on board were taken into the custody of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and remain in local detention centers.

Mr. **Bush**'s comments Thursday have sparked widespread speculation about whether the detainees might soon be **released** and have prompted lawmakers and immigration **advocates** to begin to plan how to hold the president to his word.

"He can make things happen with the new power he's got," said State Representative Phillip Brutus, a Miami Democrat who was the first Haitian-American elected to the Florida Legislature. "However, I am concerned the administration may convince him to depart from that.

"Particularly mentioning **Haitians** by name means the crisis must have reached him," Mr. Brutus said. "He must have thought about it. I **give** him great credit for that because he had never said anything before."

Others were not so sure. "The president wasn't clear," said Marleine Bastien, executive director of Haitian Women in Miami, an advocacy group. "We've been getting a lot of phone calls from people wondering about what it meant; did it mean a change in policy," she said. "If that is it, he needs to state it very clearly to prevent any kind of confusion."

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Ms. Bastien said her group and others were planning to send a joint letter to the president asking him to clarify his position.

James Morrell, executive director of the Haiti Democracy Project, an organization that monitors American policy toward Haiti, said not much could be read into the president's response. "I think it's a statement that gives no indication of whether things will change, and that's why I took the president's statement with a grain of salt," he said.

Mr. Morrell took issue with President Bush's statement that Cubans should be treated differently from Haitians because of their risk of political persecution. "Many from Haiti are politically persecuted, and so the difference between them and the Cubans is not valid," he said.

Some Haitian advocates said they remained hopeful. "I think this was a very important message," said Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. "I don't know if he is as aware as he should be about the way asylum seekers from other nations are treated in the Miami district. If he is, then he understands, given his statement, that the Haitians need to be released right away."

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