

## **New Wave of Cubans Sails to Florida Illegally**

The New York Times

October 7, 1992, Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 1992 The **New** York Times Company

**Distribution:** National Desk

**Section:** Section A;; Section A; Page 1; Column 2; National Desk; Column 2;

**Length:** 1554 words

**Byline:** By LARRY ROHTER,

By LARRY ROHTER, Special to The **New** York Times

**Dateline:** KEY WEST, **Fla.**, Oct. 6

### **Body**

---

For the first time since the Mariel boat lift brought 125,000 **Cubans** to the United States in 1980, refugees desperate to flee the dictatorship of Fidel Castro are arriving here steadily in large groups aboard Cuban vessels, in defiance of American and Cuban restrictions.

The authorities say nearly 1,000 refugees have arrived in the last two months, nearly half the number for all of last year.

The authorities say that in contrast to the **Cubans** who arrived here in the last decade, mainly in family groups or mostly in small numbers aboard makeshift rafts, the latest influx includes larger groups of people transported on commercial or private boats. The vessels leave the refugees just offshore, on uninhabited islands or near lighthouses.

Up to the Main Beach

On Monday a Cuban fishing trawler pulled up to the main downtown beach here just before dawn and let 19 people wade ashore. The refugees included Oscar Mestril Ramirez, 49 years old, who said the group **sailed** out of a harbor near Havana on Sunday night.

"We made a deal, an arrangement through an intermediary," Mr. Mestril said. "They told us when and where they would pick us up and where they would leave us off."

Under United States immigration laws **Cubans** are allowed to apply for and be given legal residence more quickly than any other national group. The Supreme Court agreed this week to consider the Bush Administration's policy of forcing refugees from neighboring Haiti to return to their homeland when picked up on the high seas. But rulings on those cases will not affect **Cubans**.

The Bush Administration argues that **Cubans** are political refugees and that an overwhelming majority of Haitians are primarily fleeing harsh economic conditions.

The **new** movement from Cuba poses a challenge to Washington, which said after the Mariel boat lift it would never again allow Mr. Castro to dictate American immigration policy, and the Bush Administration has repeated that.

## New Wave of Cubans Sails to Florida Illegally

Coast Guard officials here say they are not equipped to contain the flow, and Immigration and Naturalization Service officials said budget restrictions limit their ability to process the newcomers.

In contrast to the Mariel boat lift, the movement this year is a trickle, not a flood, and it appears to be organized more for profit than for humanitarian purposes. Cuban exile groups here say that in interviews the arrivals describe a growing smuggling network of a character and scope that could function only with the connivance of the Cuban authorities. Indeed, the refugees say, the Government is increasingly desperate for cash since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of \$5 billion a year in subsidies.

The reports about refugee smuggling are emerging as a record influx of Cubans seeks asylum in the United States. Officials say that 485 Cubans risked their lives to cross the shark-infested Straits of Florida in August and that 468 made the 90-mile journey last month. The officials say 2,203 Cuban refugees arrived last year.

### Cross-Section of Cuban Society

Usually the flow of rafts peaks in the summer and diminishes after Labor Day because of changes in wind patterns, sea currents and water temperatures that make the trip more difficult and dangerous. But September was a record month, and Coast Guard officials said they expected the movement to continue.

"All indications are that we don't see an end to this," Steven Kabick of the guard said. "It's a rare occasion that we don't have rafters coming in. It's become an everyday thing, and we are trying to work with what we've got."

Taken as a whole the arrivals offer a cross-section of Cuban society. The people who arrived on Monday included electricians, stevedores, mechanics, farm workers and solderers as well as an architect, a pharmacist, a fashion model, a boxer, a sculptor and a dancer. In interviews they have said they left because of increasing political repression and economic privation.

### Released to Relatives

A vast majority of the applicants for asylum are being processed in this isolated resort of 25,000 residents because the I.N.S. is no longer transporting them to Miami and holding them at the Krome Detention Center, as was its policy until the summer.

Now, Cubans who arrive by sea are being inspected and turned over to relatives, friends or volunteer groups that assist refugees in a remarkably compressed period of time. The reasons for the change, the I.N.S. district director in Miami, Carol D. Chasse, said, were "budgetary, and also a consideration of what the Federal Government role should properly be."

News of that streamlining, which meant that the 19 who landed on Monday were released to relatives within six hours of their arrival, has filtered back to Cuba, where there is a backlog of 100,000 requests to apply for visas at the American Interests Section.

"We are not going to get in a state of panic," Mayor Dennis Wardlow of Key West said on Monday. "If we have to we'll handle this just like Mariel. We have the volunteers to do it. There's certainly a traffic out there on the seas, but as far as the city goes, our resources have not yet been strained."

### 'Tatters and Scars'

Cuban-Americans working for refugee-relief groups said many of the people being counted by the authorities as riding rafts recently may actually be customers of the smugglers. The relief workers said they suspected that Cuban boats were taking refugees to areas outside American territorial waters and leaving the people to float on inner tubes, certain that the Coast Guard will soon spot and rescue them.

## New Wave of Cubans Sails to Florida Illegally

"Normally when someone comes over in a raft, they are severely sunburned and dehydrated, with their clothing in tatters and scars or blisters all over their hands from days of paddling," said Arturo Cobo, a Bay of Pigs veteran who is coordinator of a new refugee center operated by the White Street Baptist Church here. "In the last couple of months we have begun seeing rafters who do not present those conditions."

## Denial by Cuban Spokesman

A spokesman for the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, Ariel Ricardo, denied that his Government had encouraged, tolerated or profited from any refugee smuggling. "The Cuban Government doesn't have any interest in promoting illegal immigration," he said. "If we have proof that any boat captain has committed this act, there will be a trial."

Mr. Ricardo also said his Government was even less capable than the United States to control the refugees' movement. "Look at the map and you will see that Cuba has thousands of kilometers of coast line, with hundreds of small keys and little islands," he said. "This is a relatively difficult situation to control, and people do have the right to go fishing."

## Decrease Expected in Weeks

A State Department official who insisted on anonymity said today that although "things are getting worse in Cuba and people in positions of authority may be more amenable to a little bribery and looking the other way," there is no reason to believe that an influx of the size of the Mariel immigration wave is likely.

In contrast to the Coast Guard spokesman's expectation, he said he expected the numbers to start going down in the coming weeks, adding, "Even if the total is even 25 percent above last year, I don't think that is a significant departure or trend."

Mr. Mestril, the passenger who arrived on Monday, said the passage cost each member of the group 5,000 pesos, payable in advance. At the official rate of exchange, that would amount to \$5,000. But at black market rates, it is the equivalent of just under \$150.

Mr. Mestril arrived with his stepdaughter Ana Maria, his son-in-law Angel and his 2-year-old granddaughter, Rosa. He said he planned to rejoin his wife, mother and brother in Miami.

Another passenger, Heber Frias Cutino, 16, said that he was on deck with the captain of the vessel as she left the harbor and that he heard seven or eight shots being fired at the group by security authorities. He became frightened, he said, but the captain laughed and assured him, " 'We have nothing to worry about.' "

"You mean the security people were deliberately firing over your heads?" Mr. Cobo asked.

"That's it," the youth replied.

"In other words, all of that was for show, so that if anyone asked, they could say they had tried to stop you," Mr. Cobo said.

The youth agreed.

## Burden on Volunteer Groups

A spokesman for the I.N.S. in Washington, Duke Austin, said that although it is illegal to smuggle foreigners into the United States, that fact will not affect the Cubans' chances for asylum. "It doesn't change the eligibility of the alien if he pays somebody to smuggle him here," Mr. Austin said. "Under our laws the smuggler is guilty. But you can't prosecute the alien just because his presence is the product of an illegal activity."

## New Wave of Cubans Sails to Florida Illegally

Because of recent changes in I.N.S. policy, the burden of processing and caring for Cuban refugees has fallen largely on volunteer agencies and Cuban-Americans in southern **Florida**. Those groups, however, are trying to deal with increased demands for their services as a result of Hurricane Andrew, which also led the Federal Bureau of Prisons to transfer some prisoners from damaged jails to the I.N.S. detention center in Miami.

## Graphic

---

Photo: Cuban refugees aboard a Coast Guard vessel with one of their rafts on Monday night near Key West, **Fla.**, after fleeing their homeland. (John Berry for The **New** York Times)

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** REFUGEES (91%); IMMIGRATION (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); PUBLIC POLICY (87%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); SMUGGLING (78%); ANTI-CASTRO **CUBANS** (78%); ALIEN SMUGGLING (78%); ISLANDS & REEFS (74%); DICTATORSHIPS (73%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (73%); ECONOMIC CONDITIONS (69%); SUPREME COURTS (65%); ECONOMIC NEWS (62%)

**Company:** BUSH ADMINISTRATION (66%); COAST GUARD (56%)

**Organization:** BUSH ADMINISTRATION (66%); COAST GUARD (56%); BUSH ADMINISTRATION (66%); COAST GUARD (56%)

**Industry:** MARINE VESSELS (78%); COMMERCIAL FISHING (69%); LIGHTHOUSES & LIGHTSHIPS (69%); BUDGETS (67%)

**Person:** FIDEL CASTRO (58%)

**Geographic:** HAVANA, CUBA (78%); UNITED STATES (98%); CUBA (95%); HAITI (92%)

**Load-Date:** October 7, 1992