

# **U.S. AND CUBA TALK AT U.N. ON SOLVING THE REFUGEE CRISIS**

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**Byline:** By STEVEN GREENHOUSE,

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE, Special to The New York Times

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## **Body**

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**United States** and Cuban negotiators met for six hours today in their first face-to-face **talks** in nine months amid indications that **Cuba** was seriously weighing Clinton Administration proposals to resolve the **crisis** created by thousands of **refugees** setting sail for Florida.

The **talks**, which Administration officials said went well, were held as another hundreds of Cubans continued to be picked up by the **United States** Coast Guard in the waters off **Cuba**. As of 10 P.M., 1,792 Cubans had been picked up, bringing the total to more than 20,000 since early August.

The Administration officials said there was some hope that the two sides might reach some kind of an agreement by the weekend.

This evening, the Cuban and American diplomats adjourned their session, which was held at the **United States** mission to the United Nations. The **talks** will resume on Friday at the Cuban mission.

Tempering the signs of possible progress, however, the public statements by American and Cuban diplomats suggested that some major differences remained.

According to American and Cuban officials, the Cubans sought to use the **talks** to call for elimination of Havana's biggest grievance with the **United States**, the trade embargo, while the Americans insisted on **talking** about immigration matters only.

President Clinton has repeatedly said that he would not discuss the embargo with President Fidel Castro and would do nothing to lift it until the man who has led **Cuba** since 1959 takes steps to restore democracy.

The two sides' differing goals made some members of the American delegation fear that it could be hard to persuade **Cuba** to accept a deal that involved only immigration matters.

Although the **United States** has long treated Mr. Castro as a mortal enemy, the Clinton Administration agreed to the **talks** with Havana with the hope that the Cuban leader could be persuaded to stop the exodus of **refugees**. The **refugee** flood has created the worst **crisis** with **Cuba** since the 1980 Mariel boatlift of 125,000 Cubans.

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The main subject of the talks was an Administration proposal that the United States grant entry rights to more than 20,000 Cubans each year in return for Cuba's calling a halt to the chaotic exodus.

The Administration's strategy has been to offer Mr. Castro something he has long clamored for: a firm commitment from Washington to grant the entry rights. This would give the Cuban leader a safety valve that would help him get rid of thousands of discontented Cubans.

David Johnson, the spokesman for the American delegation, called today's talks "serious" and "business-like." He said that the United States made an offer that "can meet what we believe is a mutual objective: channeling the desire to immigrate into a legal, safe, orderly, predictable and dependable process and stemming the uncontrolled outflow."

Since Mr. Castro said in early August that his Coast Guard would no longer prevent Cubans from leaving, more than 20,000 people have fled the island in rafts, boats and inner tubes. The latest wave of boat people came after 2,159 Cubans were picked up at sea on Wednesday -- one of the highest totals since the outflow began four weeks ago.

The Administration has argued that the exodus of boat people has backfired on Mr. Castro as the flight of so many Cubans has hurt his image at home and abroad.

### Cuba Raises Embargo Issue

But Ricardo Alarcon, the former Cuban foreign minister who is heading Cuba's delegation, said the only serious way to resolve the exodus of Cubans was to address the three-decade-old embargo, which Havana insists is fueling the exodus.

"All they have to do is change that basic issue," Mr. Alarcon said on Cuba's official radio today.

Mr. Alarcon, who is the president of Cuba's National Assembly, accused the American side of seeking to sour the atmosphere by suggesting that the Castro Government had released about 100 prisoners in August and encouraged them to join the exodus of boat people.

"That information is preposterous," he said on NBC's Today show. "It's a way to create a very negative atmosphere, not only for the talks but also for those Cubans that are seeking a new life in the States."

### U.S. Policy Changed

The Clinton Administration sought the negotiations because its initial effort to halt the flood of boat people failed. On Aug. 19, Mr. Clinton ended the three-decade-old policy of admitting all Cubans, confident that Cubans would prefer to stay at home rather than be detained indefinitely at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station. But since then more than 15,000 Cubans have set out by sea, slowed only by stormy weather and daunting seas last weekend.

Another aim of the Administration's negotiators is to persuade Cuba to take back more than 1,500 prisoners who arrived in the 1980 boatlift.

Under the Administration proposal, the United States would make a firm commitment to grant entry rights to at least 20,000 Cubans a year -- and perhaps as many as 27,845, the ceiling for the number of visas that can be granted to citizens of any one country in a year.

### Dispute Over Agreement

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Mr. Castro has insisted that the Reagan Administration signed an agreement committing Washington to accept at least 20,000 Cubans a year, but several Administrations have asserted that the agreement contains no such commitment.

During the last 12 months, about 2,700 Cubans have been granted visas. Cuban-American leaders and Administration officials say that number was far below the ceiling of 27,845 because only a limited number of Cubans meet the main criterion for obtaining a visa, being an immediate family member of an American citizen or a permanent resident alien.

In Cuba, refugees have said that there were several reasons why the number of persons applying to leave legally has fallen so short of 20,000. They say that the number of Americans in Havana has been too small to process all the requests.

Administration officials say they would bring in more Cubans by immediately accepting Cubans on a waiting list for visas, using a broader definition for refugee status for Cubans, and granting entry to Cubans who do not qualify for visas under current law, like cousins, aunts and uncles of Cuban-Americans.

In an apparent effort to gain a psychological advantage, Mr. Alarcon chided the Clinton Administration by noting in television interviews today that Washington was pressing Havana to stop people from emigrating, whereas for decades Washington condemned Communist countries for barring free emigration.

Human Rights Watch, a leading human rights group, sent a letter to President Clinton this week asserting that he is seeking to deny Cubans their fundamental rights by urging Mr. Castro to stop them from leaving.

But Administration officials repeated today that they were eager to halt the exodus out of concern that many people are drowning.

## Graphic

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Photo: Yet another raft set off yesterday from Nautico Beach, in Havana. But first a young woman who was leaving embraced and kissed her mother. (Canadian Press) (pg. A12)

Graph: "TALLY: Fleeing Cuba" tracks number of Cuban refugees picked up by the Coast Guard each day since August 1. (Sources: Immigration and Naturalization Service, United States Coast Guard) (pg. A12)

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