3-10-2011

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Cuban Exodus Alert for Ecuador while Illegal Immigration to the U.S. Decreases

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Category/Department: Cuba
Published: Thursday, March 10, 2011

Havana and Quito intensified migratory and judicial regulations in early 2011 to control the monthly exodus of hundreds of Cubans to the Andean country. Meanwhile, during the last three years, illegal maritime departures from Cuba to the US and Mexico have decreased.

Some Cubans have used fraudulent marriages and de facto unions with Ecuadorans to be able to leave the island and obtain residency documents, said authorities in Quito. In September, the Ecuadoran Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio e Integración revoked the naturalizations of 167 Cubans who had benefited from arranged marriages.

Cuban emigration to Ecuador increased after June 2008 when legislation went into effect allowing citizens of any nationality to enter and stay in the country for ninety days. In some months in 2010, between 100 and 300 Cubans resided in Ecuador. Some of them have attempted to relocate to the US.

Cuban migration routes fluctuate each time that Havana sets bilateral agreements in its fight against irregular and illegal departures, including those related to smuggling in the Florida Straits and the Yucatán Channel.

In the past decade, a favorite destination of Cuban maritime escapes was Yucatán and other points along the Mexican coast, with the intent of those leaving to continue the journey to the US border and seek asylum. The number of Cuban immigrants detained in Mexico rose from 254 in 2002 to 1,359 in 2007. In the first half of 2008, the number was 1,296.

Because of agreements between Cuba and Mexico, and because of increased vigilance on the beaches of South Florida by the US Department of Homeland Security, the number of Cubans abandoning the island through the Florida Straits and the Yucatán Channel for Mexico began to decline in 2008 after increasing since 2001.

In October 2008, Havana signed a memorandum with Mexico, which established the repatriation of illegal Cuban immigrants arriving by sea or en route from Central America to the US. Both governments evaluated the progress of that agreement "positively" at a meeting held in the Mexican capital in February.

Decrease in illegal immigration

The total of undocumented Cubans, including those who managed to reach the US border and those who were intercepted, was 6,855 in the 2010 fiscal year (Oct. 1, 2009 through Sept. 30, 2010). In 2009 the figure was 8,113 and in 2008, 16,260. In FY 2007, the figure was almost 20,000.

At the end of FY 2010, the US Coast Guard (USCG) barred 422 Cubans from landing on American soil from the sea, and 799 were picked up in 2009. As indicated on the USCG Web site, the migrant interdiction statistics were 2,199 in 2008 and 2,868 in 2007.
Cuban President Raúl Castro’s government repeatedly protests the Cuban Adjustment Act, in force in the US since 1966, which allows Cubans who touch land to receive preferential treatment and apply for permanent residency one year later. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said that the law "is the main stimulus for illegal departures from Cuba and for human trafficking."

Under the "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy, implemented by the administration of former President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), undocumented Cuban immigrants are deported if intercepted at sea but can stay if they touch US soil (NotiCen, May 22, 2003).

The Cuban exile community has been hit by the economic recession, and this could result in fewer families paying the large sums demanded by smugglers to get their relatives off the island. The fee for picking up clandestine travelers from the island’s coasts or on the high sea ranges between US $5,000 and US$15,000.

The decrease in illegal immigration could also be a result of the more aggressive tactics of the USCG and increased formal indictments in suspected cases of human smuggling. Since 2006, at least 546 smugglers of illegal immigrants have faced charges in more than 300 federal criminal indictments in South Florida, according to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) sources quoted in .

In January, at the end of the latest round of immigration talks between Havana and Washington, the Cuban Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores confirmed a "significant decline in risky departures" as a result of "efforts undertaken by both countries to address human trafficking and illegal immigration."

That statement was made during the fourth round of bilateral immigration talks. The administration of US President Barack Obama holds these meetings every six months to assess the progress of the agreement and seek to ensure legal departures from the island. Former President George W. Bush (2001-2009) suspended this dialogue from 2003 to 2009; the talks resumed in 2009.

In the accords signed in 1994 and 1995, Washington committed to grant 20,000 visas to Cubans annually to promote an orderly, legal, and safe migration.

In addition, the Obama administration’s April 2009 approval for exiles to travel to the island and to send remittances to their relatives without a dollar limit has been a relief for the Cuban community (NotiCen, May 27, 2010). The Bush administration had restricted travel to once every three years, and remittances were limited to US$1,200 per year (NotiCen, Nov. 20, 2003).

Cubans living in Miami believe that tragedies on the high seas have also been a deterrent to their compatriots’ use of this route. The latest nightmare involved a group of 16 people who, on Feb. 2, secretly departed Cuba from the east coast town of Manzanillo, in Granma province, and remained at sea 12 days before arriving in Honduras. Waves capsized the boat, and, as a result, a 35-year-old man drowned.

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