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On Extortion Of Cuban Refugees Entering Panama

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Dec. 10 in Miami, Cuban-American Foundation spokesperson Clara del Valle told reporters from newspaper Panama America that in the past three months, at least 200 Cubans were victims of extortion at the hands of Panamanian officials. Each Cuban paid between US$1,500 and US$2,000 to Panamanian authorities for entry visas. Del Valle said refugee advocates became aware of the illegal activity when new Cuban immigrants in Miami began complaining about the high price exacted for visas by Panamanian officials. Panamanian Immigration Department director Antonio Dominguez called on the Foundation for evidence to substantiate the complaints. Over the past year, said Dominguez, 1,000 Cubans had traveled through Panama with all of their papers in order. In a local radio broadcast Dec. 11, Jose Antonio Garcia, director of the Cuban-American Foundation's Exodus Project, said that Panama was the main third country that Cubans attempt to pass through in order to enter the US. He noted, however, that most Cubans who attempt reach the US by way of this route never succeed in leaving Panama because they are unable to obtain US entry visas. He said that since January 1990, the US has not issued travel visas to Cubans arriving from third countries. (Basic data from ACAN-EFE, 12/10/91, 12/11/91)

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