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Cuba, U.S. Review Immigration Policy

by LADB Staff

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Cuban and US representatives held their tenth meeting Dec. 4 in Havana to monitor joint immigration policy. The talks originated after the bilateral agreement in September 1994 that brought illegal immigration from Cuba to the US under control (see Noticen, 07/23/98). At the December meeting, the major concern was organized crime's growing involvement in smuggling Cubans into the US. Deputy assistant secretary of state John Hamilton, who led the US delegation, explained at a press conference in Havana that the US Coast Guard had recently increased patrols in the Florida Straits because the number of illegal Cuban immigrants had risen from 186 in 1997 to 732 during the first 11 months of 1998.

Hamilton said the increase resulted from the introduction of well-organized smuggling operations. Instead of flimsy rafts, many Cubans are arriving in Florida aboard speedboats equipped with sophisticated navigational equipment, cellular telephones, and other devices, he said. During the talks, Cuban officials had no complaints about the increased patrols and recognized the new smuggling techniques as a threat to the interests of both countries, according to Hamilton.

To combat the increased flow of illegal Cuban immigrants to Florida, Cuban authorities agreed to use information about smugglers furnished by returning Cubans deported by the US to help eliminate such operations. Both governments cracking down on smuggling rings In September, Cuban officials said they had arrested and would try six US citizens accused of smuggling Cubans to Florida. Another six suspected smugglers were arrested in the US at about the same time. US officials said as many as 12,000 illegal immigrants from various countries enter the US annually with the help of smugglers. Cubans pay US\$8,000 and Asians as much as US\$45,000 for the service.

US government officials are concerned that the recent hurricane damage in the Caribbean and Central America will result in a flood of illegal immigrants. A task force of Florida state and federal agencies, which includes the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Army's Southern Command, has been set up to stop the smuggling networks. In November, US Attorney General Janet Reno and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) director Doris Meissner announced that authorities had broken up the largest immigrant-smuggling operation in the nation's history.

Thirty-one suspects, mostly from India, have been arraigned in a Dallas court. Most of the undocumented immigrants were from India, Pakistan, Syria, and Bangladesh. None was from Cuba, but the smugglers used Cuba, Mexico, and Ecuador as way stations. From Cuba, the smugglers moved the undocumented immigrants to Florida by speedboat, said Meissner. Neither official suggested that the Cuban government was involved in or had knowledge of the Asian smuggling operation.

The Cuban side made no public statements about the talks but Hamilton said Cuba had acceded to US requests to lower its fees for processing exit visas from US\$700 to US\$500. However, Hamilton

said that the US would like to see the amount reduced further. Many Cubans cannot afford the fee and often find the deadline for completing their application has expired before they can raise the money, Hamilton said.

For its part, the US has increased the number of nonimmigrant visas granted for Cubans from 5,361 in 1997 to 8,078 in 1998. Hamilton said both sides were pleased with the talks, and the immigration accords were achieving their goal of creating a safe, orderly, and legal immigration process. (Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, Associated Press, 12/05/98; Notimex, 10/02/98, 11/21/98, 12/05/98; CNN, 12/13/98)

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