

U.S. Might Relax Immigration Rules For Some Cubans

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Bolstered by Fidel Castro's surprising handoff of power, the Bush administration is preparing to ease immigration rules for Cubans who want to live in the United States, focusing largely on reuniting families now separated by politics and the sea.

The draft plans, still under debate, seek to discourage a mass migration from Cuba over Caribbean waters. But administration officials said they also hope the relaxed rules will prompt Cubans to push the Castro government for permission to head to the United States.

Stressing that any policy shift is not final, administration officials said the changes could be announced this week.

"Taken together, they promote safe, legal and orderly migration, while they also support the Cuban people in their aspirations for a free and prosperous society," said a draft copy of Homeland Security Department talking points obtained Monday by the Associated Press. The department oversees U.S. immigration policy.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a potential presidential candidate, yesterday praised the plans as a "great change."

The policy shift would help "create a wave of change for the Cuban people currently living under the yoke of despotism to rise up and demand their freedom," Frist said. "I encourage the administration to continue to show leadership at a time when the Cuban people need it most."

The new rules are being considered three months before elections in which Florida's governorship and at least one U.S. House seat in Florida are considered in play. Many Cuban immigrants live in the state.

The administration has been tight-lipped about changes since an ailing Castro temporarily ceded power a week ago to his brother, Raul, so that he could undergo intestinal surgery.

To discourage Cubans from heading to the United States by boat or raft, the administration is considering plans to cancel or reject visa applications from those caught trying to sneak in. Currently, Cubans stopped at sea and returned to the island do not face penalties if they apply for visas in the future.