

# U.S. to ease visa policy for Cubans

**Changes loom in U.S. immigration policy toward Cuba, both to ease some restrictions with the aim of encouraging legal migration.**

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The Bush administration will soon unveil changes in Cuba immigration policy designed to make it easier for Cubans to obtain visas but discourage them from undertaking an illegal mass exodus by sea, administration officials said Tuesday.

The changes would amount to the first concrete U.S. response, beyond official statements, to the stunning July 31 announcement that Fidel Castro had ceded power to his brother. The Cuban leader, who has ruled continuously for 47 years, is recovering from surgery prompted by a still undefined "intestinal crisis."

However, U.S. officials said the changes are the result of internal administration discussions that have been going on for months and not a direct response to the leadership changes in Cuba. The issue came to a boil in January when a group of Cuban migrants picked up on a bridge in the Florida Keys was returned to Cuba, unleashing protests in Miami.

Emilio González, a Cuban exile who heads U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and serves as part of the Bush administration's informal Cuba policy team, is expected to travel to Miami soon to unveil the changes, said two U.S. officials, who asked for anonymity because they were not authorized to speak on the matter.

Angelica Alfonso, a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services spokeswoman, said late Tuesday that a planned trip to Miami on Thursday by Gonzalez to tour Radio and TV Martí had been canceled. He had been expected to announce possible policy changes then, according to two administration officials.

Officials said the measures to be announced were specifically aimed at encouraging orderly migration -- while sending a strong signal to Cubans that Washington was in no way prepared to allow a mass migration in the style of the 1980 Mariel boatlift or the 1994 rafter exodus.

"We want Cubans on the island to understand very clearly that there is absolutely no change in our interdiction and repatriation policy toward Cuban migrants," one of the officials said, alluding to migration accords with Cuba under which Cubans stopped at sea are returned to the island and those who make it to U.S. shores stay.

Asked by a reporter about a change in immigration policy, White House spokesman Tony Snow said Tuesday that there is "no change in policy," but confirmed there were "drafts" and said "people are trying to think about what is going to happen should there be a change in the political situation in Cuba."

Snow said the Departments of State and Homeland Security, as well as other agencies, were "taking a clear look and monitoring closely the situation in Cuba."

"But as the president also has said, and Secretary Condoleezza Rice, right now we're encouraging everybody not only to stay put, but urging Cubans to stay on the island and work toward democracy."

The U.S. officials who talked to The Miami Herald said one of the measures that González is expected to announce is an increase in the number of immigrant visas the U.S. Interests Section issues annually, from the current 20,000 to an as-yet-undetermined number but perhaps several thousand more.

One official said U.S. diplomats in Cuba estimated that 500,000 to 600,000 Cubans are interested in emigrating to the United States.

Cuba has a population of just over 11 million people.

Another measure, another official said, would make it easier for Cuban doctors who defect while deployed in third countries to obtain U.S. visas.

Currently, it is difficult for such defectors to obtain U.S. visas because in most cases they are considered to be living in those countries legally and therefore have fewer rights to request U.S. refuge.

Officials said they did not have details yet, but that some sort of mechanism would be put in place to help the Cuban doctors who defect.

Tens of thousands of Cuban medical personnel are working abroad in dozens of countries -- about 20,000 in Venezuela alone -- and an estimated 500 have defected in recent years.

Other U.S. government officials said additional measures being considered were aimed at discouraging Cubans from attempting to sneak past U.S. Coast Guard vessels that patrol the Florida Straits.

The Associated Press has reported that Cubans interdicted and repatriated would be denied future U.S. visas.

Homeland Security spokeswoman Joanna González would not confirm any of the measures that administration officials said Emilio González was prepared to announce soon, but she did not dispute them.

"There are no changes at this time," she told The Miami Herald on Tuesday evening.