

# Despite political changes, Cubans still leaving island

## Migrants have continued to leave Cuba for the United States since Fidel Castro turned over control to his brother.

The Miami Herald  
Aug. 17, 2006

Fidel Castro's decision to cede power temporarily to his younger brother stunned the world, but it has not deterred undocumented Cuban migrants from leaving for the United States.

U.S. government officials in South Florida said Wednesday that Cuban migrants have continued to leave the island since July 31 when Castro made his surprising announcement that he was turning over control to Raúl Castro while he recovers from surgery for an undefined "intestinal crisis."

Twenty Cuban migrants landed on Marco Island off South Florida's west coast Tuesday, perhaps an indication migrant smugglers may be steering away from the Florida Keys and South Florida's east coast, possibly because of stepped up U.S. patrols in those areas. Border Patrol officials said it was too soon to say migrants had found a new route.

Petty Officer James Judge, a U.S. Coast Guard spokesman in Miami, said Wednesday that at least 55 people had been interdicted and repatriated to Cuba since Aug. 1.

Steve McDonald, a Border Patrol spokesman in Pembroke Pines, said more than 50 Cuban migrants had made it to South Florida in the last two weeks -- including the Marco Island group.

### NO CHANGE IN FLOW

Both McDonald and Judge said their agencies had not detected any change in the Cuban migrant flow pattern since the government change in Cuba.

So far this year at least 1,567 Cuban migrants have been stopped at sea. Most have been repatriated. A total of 2,952 Cuban migrants were interdicted last year, the largest number in one year since the 1994 rafter exodus when 37,191 were spotted at sea.

Under the current wet foot/dry foot policy, undocumented Cuban migrants caught at sea are sent back to the island -- although a few have been allowed to enter the United States for medical or investigative reasons. Some have been taken to the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, for possible resettlement in third countries.

Ramón Saúl Sánchez, head of the Democracy Movement, said 54 Cuban migrants are now at Guantánamo awaiting resettlement and that most are Cuban dissidents who would face persecution if returned. They include a 10-year-old boy who suffers from diabetes and an older man with lung cancer; both require constant medical attention, he said.

### PLEAS FOR VISAS

Four of the Guantánamo migrants spoke by telephone to reporters Wednesday at a Democracy Movement news conference in Miami and asked President Bush to grant them visas to the United States.

The migrants said the wait for resettlement is lengthy and that most have languished at the base for months. Sánchez said a former Cuban military officer has been in Guantánamo waiting for a visa from

another country for more than two years. Sánchez said a State Department official who recently visited the Cubans in Guantánamo told them they may have to wait up to four years for a visa.

A State Department official denied anyone from his agency could have said that.

#### **'ROLLING POPULATION'**

"It's a rolling population, and there's no way of telling how long any of them will be there," the official said. "It depends on the willingness of countries. We are continuously trying to find resettlement countries for these individuals."

While the State Department would not say how many have been resettled in third countries, a person familiar with the program said more than 200 Guantánamo Cuban migrants have been resettled since the policy took effect in the mid-1990s.