

As Castro heals, Cuba's people smugglers get back to business

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MIAMI – The arrival of 20 Cubans at Florida's posh Marco Island earlier this week suggests that not all residents of the communist nation are prepared to wait quietly in their homeland to see what happens to the ailing Fidel Castro.

But analysts say their arrival does not suggest the beginning of a mass exodus of refugees such as in 1980 and 1994. Instead, it signals the resumption of one of Miami's hottest illicit businesses - alien smuggling.

"This is just back to business as usual," says José Basulto, a Bay of Pigs veteran and founder of the group Brothers to the Rescue, which helped direct lifesaving aid to Cuban rafters in the early 1990s.

Rather than risk slow death by dehydration on tire-tube rafts, refugees in recent years have opted instead to pay smugglers from \$8,000 to \$10,000 per person for a spot on what refugees hope will be a fast boat to freedom.

Recent reports that Mr. Castro was undergoing surgery and had named his brother, Raúl, as his successor brought a temporary halt to the smuggling.

Some US officials have cast a wary eye toward the Florida Straits hoping the current period of uncertainty in Havana does not trigger a mass exodus of refugees to American shores. The Bush administration says it wants disaffected Cubans to remain in Cuba to help foster democratic change.

As an added incentive to stay, US officials announced that anyone intercepted at sea by the Coast Guard with a pending visa application at the US Interests Section in Havana would have their application placed at the bottom of the pile.

Analysts say they doubt the incentive is strong enough to persuade anyone to give up his or her seat on a smuggling boat. That's because under existing US policy, any Cuban who makes it to dry land in the US is automatically entitled to apply to become a permanent US resident, regardless of how they arrived.

To make it to the US, Cubans must run through a gauntlet of Cuban security officials, dangerous sea conditions, and the eagle-eyed US Coast Guard. Under the so-called wet foot/dry foot policy, any Cuban intercepted on the water is returned to Cuba.

That policy sets the stage for what has become a dangerous but highly lucrative game of cat-and-mouse between smugglers and the Coast Guard.

"The more money the Cuban community here has, the more fast boats [smugglers] can buy, the higher the price goes from \$8,000 to \$10,000 to \$12,000 per head," says Anthony Maingot, a Cuba policy expert at Florida International University. "If you get caught smuggling a boatload of 20 to 25 Cubans at \$10,000 a head, that is a lot of money, and if you get arrested you get a slap on the wrist."

The illicit trade is supported in large part by Cuban-Americans in the US willing to pay top dollar to reunite with family members. Mr. Basulto is no friend of the smugglers. He calls them "delinquents."

But Basulto says he is sympathetic to Cuban-American families trying to help their loved ones.

Government officials in south Florida are prosecuting several high-profile cases in an attempt to reverse the perception that smuggling is a profitable and victimless crime.

Many of the would-be refugees end up back in Cuba after high-speed chases. Sometimes the chase turns deadly.

Last month, US Customs officers pursuing a boat with 31 Cubans aboard fired two shots into the outboard engines to stop the suspected smugglers. After arresting the captain and crew, they discovered that one of the refugees, a young Cuban woman, had died from head injuries she sustained during the attempted escape through rough seas.

Experts say it is impossible to know how many of the smuggling operations are successful or end tragically at sea with no survivors. But what is known is that the US Coast Guard has intercepted more than 1,400 Cuban nationals each year since 2000. Most are returned to Cuba.

One of the 20 Cubans who landed near Marco Island on Tuesday is reported to have made 21 prior attempts to reach America, according to the Naples Daily News. The man told authorities that he had been intercepted and returned to Cuba twice by the US Coast Guard, the newspaper said.

The refugees at Marco Island were not the only Cubans on the move Tuesday. The Coast Guard intercepted 10 Cuban nationals and two Dominicans on an 18-foot boat headed for Puerto Rico where Washington's wet foot/dry foot policy also applies.