

# Plan prepared for Cuban exodus

## The Bush administration will build a new facility to detain migrants in Guantánamo amid stepped-up preparations for dealing with a post-Castro Cuba.

The Miami Herald  
Feb. 16, 2007

**WASHINGTON** - Concerned about a possible mass exodus of Cubans, the Department of Defense plans to spend \$18 million to prepare part of the U.S. Navy base at Guantánamo Bay to shelter interdicted migrants, U.S. officials told The Miami Herald.

The new installation is needed because terrorism suspects occupy space on the base used in past emergencies to hold large numbers of migrants, Bush administration officials directly involved said. They note that the facilities are designed to house people from any Caribbean nation who attempt to enter illegally -- not just Cubans.

But they say privately that Fidel Castro's illness and temporary hand-over of power to his brother Raúl last summer injected a renewed sense of urgency into plans to handle a mass exodus. The administration quietly requested the funds about a month ago and Congress has approved it, The Miami Herald was told.

The officials, who were authorized to speak on the subject but requested anonymity because of the sensitive nature of Cuban issues, say there is no sign a Cuban migration crisis is brewing, but they acknowledge predicting one is difficult. The 1980 Mariel boatlift, which saw 125,000 Cubans arrive in Florida, began when a group of Cubans tried to storm the Peruvian embassy in Havana.

### **BIGGER PLAN**

The \$18 million initiative is part of a broader U.S. government effort to prepare for the death of Castro. The administration will not say how many migrants it believes might flee Cuba or even if any will do so, but one expert warned that up to 500,000 may try to leave the island after Castro's death.

Top Bush Cabinet officials have met at least twice since December to review Cuba contingency plans. On March 7 and 8, the Department of Homeland Security will lead an exercise in South Florida involving the Coast Guard and dozens of federal, state and local agencies, focused on stopping U.S. boaters from picking up rafters.

The U.S. Navy base, on the eastern tip of Cuba, apparently would be used as a shelter of last resort if the volume of Cubans interdicted at sea overwhelms the U.S. policy known as "wet foot/dry foot."

Under that policy, Cubans who make it to U.S. territory are allowed to remain. Those intercepted at sea are interviewed aboard Coast Guard vessels and most are repatriated to Cuba. A few who have been found to credibly risk persecution if returned to Cuba have been taken to Guantánamo for more interviews while U.S. officials arrange for their resettlement in third nations.

U.S. officials refused to say whether the wet foot/dry foot policy will be changed in case of an exodus, since such an announcement might prompt many Cubans to leave.

For years, migrants captured during surges ended up in tent camps at Guantánamo on a bluff called Radio Range, on the larger Windward side of the base.

### **1994 MIGRATIONS**

At the height of the last migration crisis in 1994, more than 32,000 Cubans and 21,000 Haitians overwhelmed the base in tent cities. Most of the Cubans were later sent to the United States. Most of the Haitians were sent home.

The Pentagon has since built its sprawling terrorism detention and interrogation center at the site of the old tent camps, limiting shelter space. The plan would put them on the smaller Leeward side, which has an airstrip but no docks for large ships.

"The capacity to process migrants at Guantánamo is an integral part of our overall plans to ensure that any attempted mass migration in the Caribbean is not successful," said one official, who also declined to be identified. The official said the new facility is "part of prudent contingency planning."

"The U.S. has established avenues for safe, orderly, legal migration from the various countries in the Caribbean," the official added. "Any effort to send people to the United States via unsafe and illegal means will not succeed."

The Pentagon already has solicited construction bids for the new facility. The \$18 million would pay for things like land leveling, sewage and electrical infrastructure, bathrooms, dining facilities and administrative offices to process asylum applications. The installations will be initially designed to handle about 10,000 migrants, officials say, though more can be quickly accommodated if needed.

## **SCENARIOS**

Andy Gomez, senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, says focus groups and other interviews show many young Cubans are eager to leave.

"If the economic conditions do not get better, there is the strong possibility that as many as 500,000 Cubans will want to leave the island in all directions," he says. "The other possibility will also be a large group of Cubans rushing the U.S. base in Guantánamo or foreign embassies in Havana."

Latin American countries may be reluctant to take in numerous migrants, he added.

Meanwhile, the Coast Guard is finalizing plans for an exercise next month that will involve scores of vessels.

Rear Adm. David Kunkel, head of the Coast Guard's South East District, is in charge of coordinating interdiction efforts among many agencies, including the U.S. Navy and Miami-Dade Police.

"We would be concerned with boaters leaving from South Florida marinas to potentially increase the problem," said Jim Watson, chief of staff of the South East District. He said "deterrent elements" would be tested.

Miami Republican Reps. Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, who have been briefed on preparations, could not be reached for comment.