

MIGRANTS

Reunions make Cubans' trip worth it

Cuban migrants who just arrived on South Florida shores by boat said deteriorating conditions on the island forced them to flee.

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Abdiel Ramos tried to leave Cuba for the United States six times in the past six months. On Monday, the 24-year-old from Havana finally succeeded.

He was among the 26 Cuban migrants who walked up to the tollbooth at the western end of the Rickenbacker Causeway around 1:30 a.m.

"That trip was terrible," Ramos said. "But I feel really good right now."

The group of 10 men, 10 women and six children was the latest in a wave of Cuban migrants -- 663 this year -- who have come ashore in South Florida. The total for 2006 was 1,426.

This was also the third time in three weeks that Cuban migrants landed near the Rickenbacker Causeway.

After being released later by the U.S. Border Patrol, Ramos said conditions in Cuba made him keep trying.

"Everyone knows things are bad since Fidel [Castro] got sick," he said. "There is no food and people are being carted off to prison."

Ramos had plans to stay with relatives in Kendall for a while, then move to Tampa and work with some friends.

Ramos also plans to bring his mother to the States one day.

"Not on a boat, though -- nobody should have to live through that," he said.

Waiting to welcome him was his aunt, Acelia Rodriguez.

"I haven't seen him in four years. I've missed him so much," she said as she paced anxiously in a Doral parking lot where most of the migrants were brought after their release.

14-HOUR DRIVE

Also in the parking lot was Adolfo Gonzalez, 37, who has been in the United States for five years. He said he got a call Thursday from his sister in Havana. She told him their mother was on her way.

Gonzalez, who lives in Louisiana, jumped into his Dodge Caravan and drove the 14 hours to Miami to reunite with his mother, Nilda Sanchez.

"It's been five years since I've seen her," he said. "It's a disaster over there. When they call, all they say is that every day it gets worse."

Their reunion was quiet yet moving. After several days at sea, Sanchez was looking forward to a shower and a meal.

Ernesto Cuesta, assistant director of Cuban/Haitians Program of Refugee Services at the United Conference of Catholic Bishops, said such reunions are often emotional.

"You see the desperation in people's faces and you see anxiety and fear, but you also see happiness," he said. "There is also some powerlessness. You see in their faces, they've left their homeland."

Frank Figueroa, program administrator at Church World Service, another refugee relief agency, agreed.

"Even though I see it every day, it is still emotional," he said. "These people cross the ocean to be here. And a lot of time, they're scared. They're coming from a regime. They're not trained to talk."

NOT THIS TIME

Some of the people in the parking lot left without loved ones. Miriam Delgado came with a group of friends after her uncle called to tell her he had seen her son among the migrants on the morning news.

Excited, she spent the day driving from agency to agency searching for her 22-year-old son. It turned out he hadn't been on the boat.

"The next one," she said as she walked toward her car. "Maybe he'll be on the next one."