

Mexican lawyers leave Cuban rafters adrift

When Cuban rafters reach Mexico, relatives sometimes send money to immigration lawyers -- not realizing that deportation often is inevitable.

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CANCUN, Mexico --

After 27 days lost at sea, seeing two of their boat mates die, and suffering from deep hunger, Cuban rafters Angel Ricardo Zamora Domínguez and his wife, Helen, thought that freedom was at hand when they were rescued by the Mexican navy.

They were even more certain when relatives in California paid \$11,000 to a Mexican lawyer who promised to get them released in a matter of days from an immigration station in the southern state of Chiapas, where they were sent in mid-July after their rescue.

But they were disappointed. Ninety-one days after they were detained, the couple were deported to Cuba and the lawyer, Luis Felipe Mendoza Tallava, has given no convincing explanation for what happened, according to Milagros Rosell, Zamora's cousin.

"The lawyer and his wife took advantage of our anguish," Rosell told El Nuevo Herald. "They fooled me."

Rosell is not the only person disappointed by a Mexican lawyer. According to Cubans in this city who help their newly arrived compatriots, several U.S. relatives of rafters have been hiring lawyers in Mexico without knowing the true legal possibilities for the release of the rafters.

According to one of the Cubans who helps rafters in Cancún -- he asked not to be identified because of fear of reprisals -- the relatives' ignorance of legal proceedings and their eagerness to get their relatives out of Cuba push them to send money quickly, often without need or without realizing that, in some cases, deportation to Cuba is inevitable.

Under Mexican law, Cuban refugees who are intercepted at sea must be deported to Cuba. Rafters who reach land are entitled to stay in the country for 30 days. They usually head immediately for the U.S. border.

An immigration officer in Cancún, who asked not to be identified, told El Nuevo Herald that in neither case is a lawyer needed.

Damaris, a Cuban woman who works in a Las Vegas hotel preparing and serving salad for \$17 an hour, believes she lost the \$5,000 she sent to Mendoza to free a brother who arrived in the same group as the Zamoras on July 17.

She said she borrowed the money from a friend and now, to pay back the debt, has stopped paying the mortgage on her house. She says she will likely lose the house.

"These people are enriching themselves by exploiting the feelings and the dreams of other people, and that's not right," said Damaris, who asked that her surname not be published.

Mendoza did not respond to several calls from El Nuevo Herald. Rosell said she hired him over the phone, at the recommendation of a Cuban refugee who also was on the July 17 trip. According to Rosell, the lawyer's Cuban wife, Irina Fonseca Lorente, knew that refugee's relatives in Cuba.

That relationship gave Rosell some assurance, and she sent the money from Los Angeles via Western Union, in two installments. She showed the Western Union receipts to El Nuevo Herald.

Before the Zamoras were deported, Rosell added, the lawyer was reporting that the process of getting them released from the detention center for illegal migrants was going well.

But on Oct. 20, her relatives were handcuffed with plastic cord and put on a plane to Cuba with 130 other refugees.

When Rosell learned her relatives had been deported, she phoned Mendoza to complain. He told her someone had promised him that the couple were going to be sent to Mexico City. She shouldn't worry, he told her, he would sue to have Cuba extradite them.

Zamora, 28, a barber from Bayamo, and his wife, Helen, 23, a teacher of disabled children, left the eastern city of Manzanillo in a homemade boat about 19 feet long and three feet wide. Ten other people accompanied them.

Their original plan was to reach Honduras, but three days after leaving, the engine failed and they drifted at sea. Bad weather conditions and a defective compass helped send them in the wrong direction, Zamora said in a phone interview from Bayamo.

"We were very weak, we had no food, but we drew strength from thinking about our family," he said.

His cousin, Ricardo Domínguez, had a heart attack and died during the trip. Another passenger fell into the water and drowned, he said.

"God knows what he's doing, and we place ourselves in His hands," Zamora wrote to Rosell from Bayamo.