

20,000 Cubans allowed into U.S.

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a sudden reversal, President Clinton agreed Tuesday to allow some 20,000 Cubans into the United States after months of detention at Guantanamo Bay. But he said any more Cubans who flee their country will be forcibly returned home.

Cuban-American leaders expressed delight that people detained at the U.S. naval base in Cuba would be permitted to migrate, but they complained bitterly that future refugees would be turned away.

Some Republicans accused Clinton of shutting the doors on a safe haven that for 35 years has beckoned Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro's communist state.

"It's a very lamentable decision," said Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who represents the Miami area.

"How sad it is that the United States is now viewed as an accomplice in Castro's repression of the Cuban people," said Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Responding to the Republican complaints, White House press secretary Mike McCurry said: "The question is, Do they propose to let these folks rot in Guantanamo or be reunited with their families?"

"Or do they propose to open the doors in Florida and accept thousands of new immigrants? They have to answer to the strain that would be placed on communities throughout the South," McCurry said.

Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla., said on the Senate floor that Clinton's decision "was a difficult one." While endorsing Clinton's policy, Graham said the return of future refugees to Cuba "causes great concern to many people, including myself."

There were indications of a serious rift in the administration over the new policy. Dennis Hays, the State Department's coordinator for Cuban affairs, and his deputy, Nancy Mason, asked to be reassigned in protest of the decision to repatriate fleeing Cubans, officials said.

Hays headed the U.S. delegation to three rounds of talks with Cuban officials on migration issues, most recently two weeks ago in New York. He is known as a strong supporter of the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba and to have close ties to conservative Cuban-American lawmakers.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher called Hays and expressed regret about his decision and said he understood his reasons. Christopher also said he would recommend that Hays be reassigned expeditiously to another post in the Latin America bureau.

The decision to admit refugees from Guantanamo stemmed largely from fears of civil disturbances by Cubans frustrated by their captivity and angry about a policy that until now excluded them from the United States. U.S. officials say 20,916 Cubans are being held at Guantanamo.

Some 6,000 American troops are stationed at Guantanamo, and the administration said it was increasingly concerned about their safety.

Moreover, it has been costing the United States \$1 million a day to guard the Cubans and the administration was facing a \$100 million bill to upgrade the camps.

The White House said that "relatively few" of the Cubans in Guantanamo would not qualify for admission to the United States; those deemed ineligible will be returned to Havana. The remainder will be gradually admitted to the United States under a policy that allows up to 20,000 legal entrants each year from Cuba.

The new policy was struck in secret talks between Undersecretary of State Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff and Ricardo Alarcon, a former diplomat who is now Cuban National Assembly president, a State Department official said. The agreement was concluded this past weekend in Toronto after an earlier round in New York, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Administration officials described the accord as a narrow agreement that does not affect Washington's estrangement from Havana.

Attorney General Janet Reno said the new policy had three goals: to regularize migration procedures with Cuba; to provide a humanitarian solution to the volatile situation at Guantanamo and to prevent another uncontrolled exodus of Cubans on rafts and rickety boats from their homeland.

"Cubans must know that the only way to come to the United States is by applying in Cuba," Reno said.

Castro's government has promised that Cubans who try to reach the United States and are returned home "will suffer no adverse consequences or reprisals of any sort," Reno said.

The administration has been wrestling over a Cuban migration policy since last summer when nearly 35,000 people tried to reach Florida on homemade rafts. To halt that exodus, the administration shipped all the rafts to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo at the southeastern tip of Cuba and announced they would never be allowed into the United States.

Eventually, more than 32,000 Cubans were taken to Guantanamo and to a refugee facility, which was opened in Panama in September.

However, the policy gradually began to soften, allowing direct resettlement to the United States for the elderly and the infirm. Later, children and their accompanying parents were given immigrant visas.

Gen. John Sheehan, commander in chief of the U.S. Atlantic Command, said that under the new policy 500 Cubans a week will be flown from Guantanamo to the United States. Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles, a Democrat, said the process would take nine months.

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