

Refugees from the Caribbean: Cuban and Haitian “Boat People”

Two island nations in the Caribbean—Cuba and Haiti—sent floods of refugees to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. The United States had long had a policy of accepting all refugees from Cuba. Because its people were fleeing a communist dictatorship, it considered them victims of political oppression. It had returned most Haitian refugees, because it regarded them as fleeing poverty and not political repression. The influx of boat people from both nations caused many Americans to rethink what we should do about these refugees.

Refugees From Cuba

Cuba is a small island about 100 miles off the coast of southern Florida. It was part of the Spanish empire until it gained independence after the Spanish-American War of 1898. The United States occupied the country for several years in the first decade of the 20th century. From the 1920s until 1959, a series of dictators ruled Cuba.

In 1959, Fidel Castro led a revolution and overthrew the dictatorship. It soon became evident, however, that Castro intended to lead a communist regime in Cuba. As relations with the United States deteriorated, many well-off Cubans fled the island and settled in Florida. Castro allied his nation with the Soviet Union and ruled as a dictator.

In 1961, the United States sponsored an ill-fated Cuban-exile invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The following year, the United States detected Soviet missiles in Cuba, which led to a crisis that almost caused a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and United States.

For many years, the United States has imposed a trade and travel embargo on Cuba and has broken off diplomatic relations

between the countries. The United States also adopted a policy of accepting all refugees from Cuba. Two crises—one in 1980 and another in 1994—put that policy to the test.

In April 1980, several Cubans broke through the gate and demanded asylum at the Peruvian embassy in Havana. Soon, a huge crowd surrounded the embassy, and over 10,000 Cuban citizens rushed inside asking for asylum. After several days of negotiations with Castro’s government, eight American nations agreed to take most of them as political refugees. The United States promised to admit 3,500 of these Cubans.

The Mariel Boat Lift

Shortly after settling the problem at the Peruvian embassy, Castro announced that any Cuban would be allowed to leave the country. Word of this announcement spread quickly through Florida’s Cuban community of 600,000 people. These Cubans immediately seized on this unexpected opportunity to get their relatives out of Cuba. Overnight, Florida Cubans got together a fleet of boats they owned, rented, or chartered. They sent this fleet racing for Cuba. Some of the boats were little more than outboard pleasure craft.

Over the next few days, Cuban gunboats met the boats from Florida and escorted them into Cuba’s Mariel Harbor, 110 miles from Key West, Florida. The boat crews handed Cuban soldiers lists of relatives they wanted to bring back to the United States. The relatives were notified by Cuban police and transported to Mariel. Hundreds of other Cubans made their way to the Cuban port hoping to get passage to Florida.

During May and June, hundreds of boats made the trip. In some cases, boat owners



At its nearest point, Cuba is about 100 miles south of Florida. Just to the east of Cuba is Haiti, about 500 miles from the United States. (Perry-Castaneda Map Collection, University of Texas Library)

charged as much as \$1,000 a person to pick up the Cubans and bring them to Florida. At the peak of the boat lift, 300 boats were reportedly anchored in Mariel Harbor waiting for passengers. Another 200 boats waited their turn outside the harbor.

On arrival in the United States, many of the Cuban “boat people” were met by relatives in Key West and joyous reunions took place. One newly arrived Cuban said, “It is the thing we have dreamed about and prayed for, but never thought would happen.”

When asked why they decided to leave their homes, Cubans talked about the difficult living conditions. They mentioned the lack of fresh vegetables and the rationing of rice and meat. They complained about unemployment and low wages. Some said that they were fed up with the police constantly watching them.

“They ask for your I.D. card everywhere,” said one boat-lift refugee. “They’re always watching you. People are afraid to talk.”

Castro had several reasons for allowing people to leave Cuba. The mass exodus relieved the pressures for food and other goods. Also, it gave Castro a chance to get rid of those critical of his regime. In a May Day rally held in Havana, Castro shouted, “We don’t want them, we don’t need them!” In addition, rumors began to circulate that the Cuban government had added vagrants and criminals to the boat lift.

As far as the United States was concerned, the whole boat-lift operation was illegal. At first, the federal government did not act. Finally, President Jimmy Carter called the boat lift an “unprecedented emergency” and ordered the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard to help boats in

distress. By the end of May, about 1,000 boats in trouble had been aided or even towed to shore. Remarkably, fewer than 30 boat-lift refugees died at sea.

Meanwhile, U.S. authorities had to deal with refugees who had arrived in Florida. Toward the end of May, well over 100,000 of them were crowded into temporary refugee centers. Many were airlifted from Key West to Elgin Air Force Base in northwest Florida where a tent city was created to house them.

In late May, amid reports that as many as 250,000 more Cubans might try to reach Florida, the U.S. government began to act. It seized boats sailing for Cuba and fined their owners. The boat lift was over. About 120,000 Cuban refugees now had to be resettled in the United States.

Refugee camps were set up in Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas. Under U.S. law, all refugees must be sponsored. This means that someone must be responsible for the refugee until he or she becomes self-supporting. Those Cubans with relatives in the United States found sponsors and were quickly processed out of the camps. But many of the refugees, especially young single men, had no relatives to act as sponsors. They were detained for weeks waiting for sponsors to be found for them. As the hot summer developed, riots broke out at several refugee camps.

In 1985, after years of indecision, all but about 2,500 of the Cuban boat people were granted permanent resident status. Both countries agreed to allow 20,000 Cubans to leave for the United States each year. This agreement quickly unraveled as rifts developed between the Reagan administration and the Castro regime.

The Cuban economy depended heavily on the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the Cuban economy was badly hurt and discontent grew. In 1994, several ferries were hijacked by Cubans trying to leave the island. Trying to prevent further hijack-

ing, Castro once again declared that all Cubans who wanted to leave, could leave.

Many Cubans boarded small boats and rafts, hoping to make it to the U.S. mainland. But the Clinton administration did not want a repeat of the Mariel boat lift. It ordered the Navy and Coast Guard to pick up the refugees and take them to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba. This marked the first time that Cubans had been denied entry to the United States.

The Cuban and U.S. governments negotiated a new agreement. Cuba agreed to stop the refugees, but to allow 20,000 per year to emigrate. The United States would process their applications in Cuba. The United States also allowed the more than 30,000 Cuban refugees held at Guantanamo to immigrate. But the Clinton administration stated a new “wet feet–dry feet” policy toward refugees who fled on their own: Cuban refugees caught at sea would be returned to Cuba. Cuban refugees who made it to the U.S. shore could stay.

The Bush and Obama administrations have continued to follow this policy. In 2003, President Bush suspended talks with Cuban officials about migration policy. Those talks were resumed by President Obama in 2009 and again in 2010, but the goal is to monitor adherence to the earlier agreement on 20,000 visas, not necessarily reform.

Refugees From Haiti

Haiti is another Caribbean nation. It is located on the western half of an island called Hispaniola, one of Columbus’ first landfalls. (The other half of the island is the Dominican Republic.) By 1700, the French had seized Haiti and turned it into the richest sugar-producing colony in the Caribbean. Disease, mass murder, and slave labor quickly annihilated the island’s original inhabitants.

Inspired by the revolution in France, Haitian slaves revolted in 1791 and, after much blood-



Since the early 1990s, it has been U.S. policy to intercept all the Haitian boat people fleeing their country and return them to Haiti. (U.S. Coast Guard)

shed, gained control of the French colony. During the next century, Haiti had some 50 rulers, nine of whom declared themselves "president for life." Civil war, military revolts, political assassinations, and destruction of foreign-owned property finally led to the 1915 occupation of Haiti by the United States. U.S. Marines remained in Haiti for nearly 20 years. After the Marines left in 1934, U.S. policy created a Haitian security force, which exercised virtual control over the national government.

In 1957, Francois Duvalier (called "Papa Doc" by the Haitians) installed a dictatorship. "Papa Doc" established his own private police force known as the Tontons Macoutes (bogeymen). Their bloody terror tactics helped keep him in power.

When "Papa Doc" died in 1971, his son, Jean Claude Duvalier (known as "Baby Doc") took power. In contrast to "Baby Doc's" rich lifestyle, Haitians continued to suffer under the heel of poverty, government corruption, and murderous repression.

In 1986, public demonstrations forced "Baby Doc" to flee Haiti. Joyous mobs surged into the streets of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital. A five-member council, led by a general, took control of the government. It promised democratic elections, but failed to carry out the promise. Many important Haitians still owed their wealth and power to the old way of doing things. The leading opponent of the wealthy elite was Jean-Bertrand Aristide. A Roman Catholic priest, Aristide spoke out on behalf of Haiti's slum dwellers and rural peasants. In 1988, armed men attacked Aristide's church and killed 13 of his parishioners. Aristide went into hiding.

In 1990, the United States and the United Nations forced a presidential election on Haiti's military government. Aristide ran, and he won an overwhelming victory in the first truly democratic election held in Haiti's 200-year history.

Seven months after taking office, Aristide was overthrown by another military revolt.

President Aristide fled to Venezuela and later sought asylum in the United States.

The Haitian Boat People

Back in Haiti, many of Aristide's supporters were beaten, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered. With the country in turmoil, the economy shattered, and poverty taking its toll, nearly 40,000 people tried to escape Haiti by boat during the winter of 1991-92. They headed for the United States, about 500 miles away. Many died at sea. The U.S. Coast Guard intercepted most of the survivors and took them to the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Here the refugees were interviewed to determine if they were seeking asylum or simply escaping from Haiti's terrible poverty. Most qualified for asylum.

Soon the facilities at Guantanamo could not handle the increasing number of refugees. President George H. W. Bush ordered the Coast Guard to return all the boat people to Haiti, regardless of their status. Critics argued that this new policy violated the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its protocol, which the United States had signed.

The convention on refugees prohibits the return of refugees to their homeland if they have a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." This international treaty was written in response to the experience of Jewish refugees who had been forced back into Hitler's hands when other nations refused to grant them asylum.

When Bill Clinton became president in 1993, he continued Bush's policy. He argued that prohibiting the immigration of Haitian refugees would prevent many Haitians from drowning in an attempted ocean crossing.

Clinton pledged to work to restore President Aristide to office, saying that Aristide's return would end the refugee crisis. In the meantime,

the issue of the alleged American violation of the convention on refugees came before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Clinton administration argued that the convention applied only to aliens who had already managed to reach U.S. soil, not to those intercepted on the open sea by the Coast Guard. In 1993, the Supreme Court agreed (by a vote of 8-1) with the government's position. It said that the treaty did not "say anything at all about a nation's actions toward aliens outside its own territory." [*Sale v. Haitian Centers Council*]

After numerous negotiations and the threat of an American invasion, the Clinton administration got Aristide restored to power in 1994. The following year, another man was elected president. Aristide formed an opposition party. A political stalemate gripped the government. In 2000, a highly disputed election returned Aristide to the presidency. Gunmen made several attacks on the opponents of the government. In 2002, the Organization of American States called on Haiti to resolve its political stalemate, increasing violence, and problems of human-rights violations.

Poverty and political violence remain a daily reality in Haiti, and questions of the U.S. responsibility to Haitian refugees still trouble Americans. Haitians continue to be expelled from U.S. waters and sent back to the crushing poverty and political dangers that await them in Haiti. In 2003, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that Haitians who make it to American soil and apply for asylum will be detained on grounds of national security until their asylum cases are settled.

But Haitians are subjected to more than political violence. In 2010, an earthquake devastated the nation, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, wounded, sick, or starving. The Obama administration gave temporary protected status to unauthorized Haitian immigrants living in the United States. This gives them work visas but not official asylum status. They will neither be deported back to a life-threatening

situation, nor will they have eligibility for permanent residence.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How was the United States involved in the past in the internal affairs of Cuba and Haiti?
2. How are the two countries similar? Different? Compare the circumstances of the refugees from both countries.
3. What has been the U.S. policy since the Cuban Revolution toward refugees from Cuba? What is U.S. policy today? What do you think accounts for the change?
4. What is the U.S. policy toward refugees from Haiti? Why do you think it differs from U.S. policy toward Cuban refugees?
5. Do you think the United States has a responsibility to help the Cuban and Haitian people? If so, where should the United States draw the line?
6. Do you agree with the Supreme Court decision in *Sale v. Haitian Centers Council*? Why or why not?
7. Should U.S. refugee rules be the same for persons coming here (a) to flee political oppression, (b) to escape extreme poverty, and (c) to escape natural disaster? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

What Should U.S. Policy Be Toward Cuban and Haitian Refugees?

In this activity, students role play members of a presidential commission that has been set up to study and make recommendations on policy toward Cuban and Haitian refugees.

1. Divide the class into groups of five or six students. Each group will role play a presidential commission.
2. In each group, members should do the following:
 - a. Discuss what the policy should be for Haiti and Cuba. There are many possi-

ble policies. A few are listed below.

- b. Decide on the best policy for each nation.
 - c. Be prepared to present your policy decisions and the reasons for them to the class.
3. Have each group present its policy decisions and the reasons behind them.
 4. Hold a discussion on the policy options. Conclude with a vote on the best options.

Some Possible Policy Options

1. **Keep the status quo.** All people intercepted at sea will be returned to their home country. All Cubans reaching land and applying for asylum will be granted it. All Haitians reaching land and applying for asylum will be held in custody and their cases will go through the normal asylum process.
2. **Screen all refugees.** All refugees intercepted at sea will be taken to refugee camps within the United States and screened to see if they qualify for asylum. Those who do not qualify will be returned to their home country.
3. **Get rid of the special status for Cuban asylum seekers.** Cubans who make it to U.S. shores will no longer automatically qualify for asylum status. Like other asylum seekers, their cases will be examined on an individual basis to see if they qualify for asylum.
4. **Give the Haitians the same special status as Cubans.** Apply to Haitians the "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy.
5. **Return to the previous policy for Cuba of admitting all refugees from that island nation.** In the past, it did not matter whether the refugee had arrived on U.S. shores or were intercepted at sea. All were admitted as refugees.