

## Chapter 6: Immigration Issues

As Elizabeth Hernández, 22, left Cuba with her family in the middle of the night, she looked forward to her new life in the United States. After being at sea for three days, they finally spotted land. The rickety boat had reached the Florida Keys on January 4, 2006 just in time. As the boat began falling apart, they reached an abandoned bridge that no longer connected to land. The new bridge, which does connect to dry land, was just 100 yards away.

As the refugees clung to the pilings, they were spotted by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard had been instructed to enforce the U.S. policy known as "wet foot/dry foot." Under the controversial practice, refugees who reach U.S. soil are allowed to stay, but those stopped at sea are returned to their native countries.

The U.S. Coast Guard decided that the former bridge was not part of U.S. soil because sections of the bridge were missing and it no longer connected to dry land. Therefore, Coast Guard officials did not think the bridge counted as "dry land." Human rights leaders were outraged, saying that returning the refugees to Cuba was cruel and that they would be persecuted if returned to the island.

Ramón Saúl Sánchez, head of the Cuban-American Democracy Movement went on an 11-day hunger strike to protest the group's return to Cuba. He and others argued that the Cubans would be treated poorly if they were sent back to their homeland.

On February 28, 2006, a federal judge ruled that the U.S. government had acted illegally when it sent home the 15 Cubans who had made it to the bridge. Further, the judge ordered federal officials to "use their best efforts" to help the Cubans return to the U.S. [i] When Elizabeth Hernández heard the news she said, "I am so happy. I always had hope I would be able to return." [ii]

Cruz, Barbara. *Triumphs and Struggles for Latino Civil Rights*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2008.

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[i] Judge says rejecting 15 Cubans was wrong," *St. Pete Times*, March 1, 2006, p. 5B.

[ii] Laura Wides-Muñoz, "Judge Rules in Favor of Cubans on Bridge," February 28, 2006, <http://thecompletestory.blogspot.com/2006/02/judge-rules-in-favor-of-cubans-on.html>, retrieved June 13, 2006.