



A FEW MILES OFF MIAMI, a Coast Guard crew approaches a boat carrying 10 Cubans last September; the migrants had fled Cuba seeking political asylum in the U.S.

Troubled Waters

Thousands of Cubans struggle to make it to the U.S. every year. But as they approach Florida, the Coast Guard tries to stop them. **By Abby Goodnough**



The drama unfolded live before TV viewers across Florida. On September 23, a few miles off Miami's coast, U.S. authorities struggled to keep 10 Cuban migrants in a home-made metal boat from reaching the beach. A Coast Guard crew used a rope to stall the boat's engine, and sprayed the migrants with a hose to try and stop them. When that didn't work, a Customs and

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Border Protection boat bumped the vessel hard enough to send some of the Cubans overboard. After more than an hour, the Cubans were rounded up for questioning, and ultimately, they were all denied entry into the U.S.

Incidents like this have become increasingly common off the shores of Florida. According to Coast Guard data, 2,952 Cubans were intercepted at sea in 2005, nearly double the number for 2004.

The number of Cubans stopped at sea is at its highest level since 1994, when 37,000 took to the Florida Straits in an exodus sanctioned by Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Today, the sharp rise of migrants—and an increase in clashes between would-be immigrants and the Coast Guard—are inflaming tensions over a policy enacted in 1995 by President Bill Clinton to handle the influx of Cubans trying to enter the U.S.

'WET FOOT, DRY FOOT'

The 1995 policy, known as “wet foot, dry foot,” allows Cubans who reach land in the U.S. to stay, while those caught at sea are sent home. This controversial approach—which does not apply to any other immigrant group—came under fire in January when 15 Cuban boaters reached an abandoned bridge piling in the Florida Keys. They were returned to Cuba after U.S. officials concluded that the structure did not constitute “dry land.”

Critics blame the policy for at least 39 deaths last year in the Florida Straits, arguing that it encourages Cubans to risk their lives. “Our Coast Guard is being put in the untenable position of endangering lives in order to keep people from reaching our shores,” says Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center.

Many Cubans pay thousands of dollars, often provided by relatives in the U.S., to smugglers who whisk them across the Florida Straits on speedboats, several of which capsized in 2005. Others try the dangerous trip on homemade rafts.

That so many Cubans are attempting the 90-mile sea passage each year, desperate to reach the U.S., is telling of the hardships they face at home. (Those who are repatriated to Cuba by the U.S. after failing to make it to dry land face a particularly difficult time for having tried to escape.)

Fidel Castro has ruled Cuba, a nation of 11 million people, with an iron hand for more than 45 years. In 1961, he declared Cuba a socialist state and allied it with the Soviet Union, triggering years of troubled relations with the U.S. (See *Times Past*, p. 24.) In 1962, the U.S. toughened its trade embargo against Cuba, which is still in effect.

For three decades, Cuba's economy was kept afloat by aid from the Soviet Union; its collapse in 1991 severed Cuba's lifeline and sent its economy into a free fall from which it still hasn't recovered. In addition, Castro's repressive policies have intensified in recent years; dissent is not tolerated and human rights are routinely violated.

With life in Cuba becoming increasingly difficult, recent arrivals say, people are fleeing in greater numbers. The problem they are encountering is that the U.S. is doing more than ever to keep them out.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Even as the number of Cuban migrants balloons and President George W. Bush proposes new laws to curb illegal immigration, there is no plan to re-examine the wet foot, dry foot policy, says Janelle Hironimus, a State Department



CASTRO has ruled Cuba for more than 45 years; a street scene in Havana (right).



spokeswoman. She says Castro's policies are behind the increase in migration attempts. But many Cuban-Americans in Florida put more of the blame on the U.S., saying that new limits on their visits to Cuba and on the money they can send to relatives there (imposed in 2004 to increase pressure on Castro) have led to greater desperation among Cubans.

Some were particularly angered by a recent case in which the Coast Guard made no attempt to save two older women trapped below a capsized boat that had been intercepted en route to Florida. (They later drowned.) The Coast Guard defends its actions and says it followed standard procedure.

Matthew Archambeault, a lawyer for the surviving migrants on the boat, sees things differently. “We are concerned about the policy and the effect it has on the way the Coast Guard does its business,” he says. “We do feel they sacrifice safety to keep people away from dry land.”