

Many Cubans Entering United States Unlawfully

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Hundreds Are Smuggled Across Border

By DICK BARNES

MIAMI (AP) — Hundreds of Cubans have sneaked or been smuggled into the United States from Mexico this year in a semi-organized traffic fed by a year-old limit on Latin immigration.

In ways ranging from slipping through a hole in the border fence to being ferried across the Rio Grande hiding in a lard barrel, the Cubans are coming illegally to avoid the lengthy delays and red tape encountered in seeking legal visas.

But despite their illegal entries the Cubans usually are home free once they are across the border.

From January to April, U.S. officials estimate, 500 Cubans entered the country illegally. This compares with the more than 3,000 who arrive legally each month on the freedom airlift from Havana to Miami.

SCOPE OF TRAFFIC

Nonetheless, the scope of the illegal traffic has been large enough to attract the interest of several government agencies, including the Central Intelligence Agency. It also has brought both tougher enforcement and a loosening of some procedures—steps which officials say reduced the number of illegal entries to 64 in May.

Cubans who have entered illegally are reluctant to talk about it. Some still fear for themselves—"These Mexicans

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tell you they will cut your tongue out if you talk," said one Cuban. Others hope to get a relative into the United States by the same process, so they want no light shed on it.

To learn how the smuggling operates, The Associated Press talked to investigators and officials in Washington, D.C., Texas, Arizona, Mexico and Florida, then sifted through Miami's Cuban community to locate illegal entrants or their immediate relatives.

PATTERN EMERGES

From the discussions with the Cubans—all of whom talked only on guarantee of anonymity—there emerged a pattern of legal flight from Cuba to Mexico, struggles with red tape and delay in Mexico City while trying to come legally to this country, increasing desperation, contact with some Mexican operative and finally a furtive trip across the border.

"If I had it to do again, I'm not sure I would do it," said one woman. "I was so scared. After the whole thing had passed, all I could think is 'What do I do if anyone asks for papers?' I was afraid I'd be sent back to Cuba."

But due to the peculiar relationship between Cuba and the United States, her fears were groundless. Most aliens who enter this country illegally can be deported if caught. But this doesn't hold for most Cubans and most of them know it.

Some of them—the Immigration and Naturalization Service believes nearly all—go to an Immigration office either on their own initiative or after urging from friends or relatives.

"Once they get in, the service is the best friend they have," said associated commissioner James F. Greene.

NOT DEPORTED

"We can't deport them to Mexico because the Mexican government doesn't want them, and we don't deport them to Cuba."

Before last July 1, a Cuban who got to Mexico City or any other Western Hemisphere nation could get a regular entry visa and come to the United States. But then a 120,000-person annual limit on Western Hemisphere immigration went into effect, cutting the source of entry for Cubans by more than 80 per cent.

The increasingly long wait for a legal visa coupled with a Mexican prohibition against Cubans working in that country has increased the pressure on Cubans to get out of Mexico any way they can.

Even getting into Mexico can take months. A few Cubans escape to Mexico by boat, but most go there legally via scheduled airlines with proper visas and authorization from the Castro government.

A 41-year-old Cuban woman waited a year to get her visa to Mexico—such a long wait that her father and older sister who were to accompany her died in the meantime.

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Once in Mexico and worried about her ailing mother in the United States, the woman made contact through the Mexico City Cuban community with a Mexican whose name she was not told. The Cuban community there is a ready source of information and expertise on illegal crossings.

"She had to pledge not to blame the people who made the arrangements if she was caught," related her brother.

And caught she was.

After paying \$300, she was taken by bus north to the border with several other Cubans. They crossed the Rio Grande on a raft near Brownsville, Tex., but were intercepted on the U.S. side of the river and sent back to Mexico. Then they were returned to Mexico City.

A tougher policy on rejecting Cubans caught right at the border is one move U.S. officials are taking to try to discourage the illegal immigration. Deportation is not involved in such cases. The government simply refuses entry to the person caught.

31 CAUGHT AT BORDER

In April, the peak month of illegal crossings when 175 Cubans were known to successfully enter the country, another 31 were caught at the border and refused entry.

For the Cuban woman who was caught, however, it meant merely a two-week delay. She was driven again to the border.

"This time she hid in a lard drum on a boat and she got in without getting caught," said her brother.

At least one such crossing

ended in disaster. Six members of a Cuban family drowned June 3 when a boat overturned in the river near Rio Grande City, Tex.

Not all crossings are made at the river.

A divorced mother who sneaked across with her 14- and 12-year-old daughters said she had been waiting for three years to get a seat on a freedom flight.

COULDN'T STAY

Finally she went to Mexico City, where she intended to acquire a legal visa to the United States. "But the high cost of living in Mexico City—with two daughters I could not afford to stay there," she said.

"In the hotel some Cuban asked me if we want to cross the border. I said 'Yes.' We moved to the border in a bus. There, we went to a hotel and a Mexican came to the group and he said, 'You are Mrs. ———.' I said, 'Yes, I am.'"

"I paid \$600 at the frontier for the three of us. And they don't accept pesos," she said. "It was 600 U.S. dollars."

The crossing took place near Nogales, Ariz., where officials say, at least 90 Cubans crossed during one week in April.

Though most border crossings are at night, the woman and her daughters came across at noon on a dark, rainy day.

HOLE IN FENCE

"There is a fence which divides the American and Mexican territory," she said. "The fence is about that high," she added gesturing at the 8-foot-ceiling of her neat Miami apartment. "It has a hole at ground level."

The Cubans simply stepped through the hole.

The older daughter, eyes twinkling, said she was not scared. "It was a heavy rain and I was enjoying it." But her sister shyly nodded "yes" when asked if she were scared.

From the border, the mother and daughters made it to Tucson, Ariz., where they boarded a plane for Los Angeles to stay with the woman's sister. Money for the escape, she said, had come from the sister and the

daughters' father, who already was in Florida.

In Los Angeles, she said she reported to the authorities. "I talked to an American who spoke Spanish fluently. They asked many questions..." she said.

Lengthy questioning of illegal entrants is one Immigration Service technique for trying to cut down the smuggling of Cubans.

A dentist who crossed the Rio Grande on a wood-and-canvas raft said he was questioned on four occasions by immigration officials in Miami.

ENTRANTS SCREENED

An officer of a government intelligence unit in Florida said for a time the Central Intelligence Agency had a detachment in Miami screening illegal entrants.

Robert L. Woytych, district director for the Immigration Service in Miami, said: "Like any investigation, we try to learn. If there is an appearance of smuggling involved, we try to develop as many facts as we can to see how they come across."

The Cubans who report to the Immigration Service after entering the country illegally are given a so-called indefinite voluntary departure date. In practice this means they can stay as long as they want, although they can never acquire permanent resident status without leaving the country and reentering with a valid visa. They can hold jobs but not apply for citizenship.

ANNUAL LIMIT

The 120,000-person annual Western Hemisphere immigration limit is allocated on a first come, first-served basis to persons in the order they certify they will have a job or family support in the United States. There is no country-by-country quota, so theoretically, all 120,000 could come from the same country if they were in line first.

The number of would-be immigrants is growing at about twice the rate the quota allows persons to come to this country. Thus, for every month a person delays in submitting his papers, he may have to wait an addi-

tional two months for his visa.

In a move to cut the pressure for illegal entry, immigration officials have recently eased the way for Cubans who show up in Mexico City to skirt visa requirements if they can prove they have relatives in the United States, said Greene.

In the year ending July 1, 1968—the last without the quota—15,308 Cubans were issued visas by U.S. consuls abroad. For the first six months under the new quota, only 1,349 visas were issued abroad.

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