

Two Cubans dead, 10 missing after raft capsizes off Key West

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The United States Coast Guard announced Sunday that it was suspending the search for 10 Cuban migrants, who were lost at sea after their vessel capsized 16 miles south of Key West, Florida. Aside from the missing 10, two other Cubans were found dead, while just eight survived the voyage.

While the number of Cuban migrants attempting to reach the US is well below the number seen prior to 2017, deteriorating economic conditions on the island following the collapse of tourism and the fall-off in subsidies from Venezuela have led increased numbers to attempt the dangerous journey.

Reports indicate the group of Cubans left the port of Mariel, west of Havana, on May 23, only to see their vessel capsize and disappear Wednesday night. Neovys Morales, a friend of the family of one of the migrants, told ABC Miami, “It was a rustic boat—what the Cubans call ‘un balsa’—a raft made of barrels.”

The disaster is the largest loss of life among Cuban migrants since last November, when a group of 17 left northwest Cuba in a fishing vessel and were never heard from again. In a separate incident, a group of 11 migrants was interdicted by the Coast Guard off Islamorada, a small group of islands in the Florida Keys. One man on the raft was dead, apparently due to a loss of necessary medication when the boat capsized during the journey.

Most of those picked up at sea by the Coast Guard are expected to be “repatriated,” that is, returned to Cuba, though it is not clear if that will be the fate of the eight who were found off Key West. In just the past week, two different groups of Cubans, numbering 29 in all, were interdicted and sent back to the island. Already, since the beginning of the fiscal year in October, the Coast Guard says it has caught 308 Cubans at sea, a large increase from the previous year, in which only 49 were caught making the attempt.

These numbers are a far cry from the number of those who attempted the journey before former US President Barack Obama ended the “wet foot, dry foot” policy beginning January 2017, in one of his last acts in office. Under that

policy, which began in 1995, Cuban migrants who were able to make it to land were able to easily remain in the US and claim residency. In 2016, 1,845 Cubans made it to the US in this way, while in 2018 the number fell to just 107.

Since the end of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy, Cuban migrants have been treated just as monstrously by US immigration officials as other migrants and refugees. Additionally, legal avenues for migration have all but disappeared following the shutdown of consular services at the US Embassy in Cuba by the Trump administration in September 2017.

Previously, 20,000 visas per year were allocated to Cubans wishing to migrate legally to the US. However, State Department officials shut down visa processing due to alleged “attacks” causing brain injuries and other murky symptoms it claimed were suffered by CIA agents and US diplomats stationed in Cuba.

Although no real evidence was produced which would substantiate these allegations, the shutdown of consular services was entirely in line not only with the anti-immigrant position of the Trump administration. Trump also rolled back many of the Obama administration’s moves to normalize relations with Cuba in an attempt to exacerbate the crisis on the island and foment regime change, a long-term goal of reactionaries in both Miami and Washington D.C.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the growing crisis, which had already reached an advanced stage owing to the continued tightening of the economic screws by the Trump administration and the economic collapse of Havana’s close ally Venezuela. The latter had been supplying Cuba with oil on extremely preferable terms since 2000. Due to falling Venezuelan output, driven by US sanctions and the fall in the price of crude oil and other commodities in 2014, Cuba’s shipments from Venezuela fell by nearly half, from around 110,000 barrels per day to about 55,000 from 2016 on.

Although Cuba was less hard hit by coronavirus than many other countries in Latin America, due to its relatively

advanced public health infrastructure, and has registered only around 950 deaths, the Cuban government has estimated the economy shrank 11 percent last year, the biggest contraction since 1993. Restrictions on travel around the world led to a sharp fall-off in tourism, with visitors to the island numbering only 1.1 million in 2020, compared to around 4 million in most recent years. Minister of Economy and Planning Alejandro Gil has indicated the country only expects to see 2.2 million visitors in 2021.

Additionally, Cuban sugar producer AZCUBA has reported the sugar harvest this year is around one-third lower than expected, and at 816,000 tons, the smallest harvest since 1908. Sugar production was hit by a combination of a lack of fuel for sugar milling and harvesting, as well as COVID-19 outbreaks among sugar industry workers.

The reduction in hard currency as a result of these developments and others has led to shortages of all kinds of imports, which dropped 40 percent over the previous year. Cuba imports around 80 percent of its food and other necessary commodities. The scarcity of hard currency and the pressure on imports also led to the end of the dual currency system in January of this year, which effectively served as a subsidy for both Cuban industry and individuals.

Cuban state-owned companies are being given a year to balance their books, but it is expected that many state companies will be rendered insolvent by the change, which leaves them unable to take advantage of previous favorable exchange rates. Prices have risen dramatically due to these measures, with official inflation estimated at 160 percent. Salaries and pensions of public sector workers were increased between 400 percent and 500 percent in an attempt to soften the blow, but the increase does not apply to those working in the increasingly growing private sector, which officially numbers around 600,000 people, or around 13 percent of the labor force.

Far from offering any help to its close neighbor, the Biden administration has maintained Trump's policies in regard to Cuba. While he had campaigned on reversing measures that "have inflicted harm on the Cuban people and done nothing to advance democracy and human rights," nothing has changed since Biden entered the White House. Indeed, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on May 14 that Cuba was being placed on a list of countries that are "not cooperating fully with United States antiterrorism efforts," along with Iran, North Korea, Syria and Venezuela. In regard to Cuba, the move was largely symbolic, since Trump already placed Cuba on the list of state sponsors of terrorism before he left office.

Juan S. Gonzalez, the White House National Security Council's senior director for the Western Hemisphere, told the *Miami Herald's* Andres Oppenheimer, the Biden

administration has "no major urgency to invest a lot of time" on Cuba "unless we see concrete things," noting, "Human rights will be a key factor in any conversation that we may have with the regime."

Biden no doubt hopes his aggressive stance in regard to Cuba will translate into electoral support for the Democrats among right-wing Cuban Americans in Florida.

In the midst of this crisis, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) held its Eighth Congress on April 16-19. Notably, Raúl Castro stepped down from his position as First Secretary of the PCC, handing the office over to Miguel Díaz-Canel, marking the first time since the Cuban Revolution that a Castro has not held an official leading position. President of Cuba since 2019, Díaz-Canel is a trusted functionary, whose main goal is to find a way to maintain the bureaucracy's grip on political power while it attempts to appropriate the country's remaining assets and expose more of its economy to market forces.

More changes in this direction were announced in February, when the government announced an expansion of the private sector. The list of approved private sector activities was increased from just 127 to more than 2,000, although supplies and credit remain scarce.

In a speech to the congress, Díaz-Canel noted that while the US embargo and sanctions represented an enormous obstacle, "In asserting this truth, there is no intent to hide the deficiencies of our own reality, which has been repeatedly discussed. In the last three decades, the economic, commercial, and financial blockade [has been] intensified opportunistically and with evil intent in periods of great crisis so that hunger and misery might provoke a social explosion that undermines the legitimacy of the Revolution."

With an economic downturn that threatens to rival the "Special Period" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba indeed faces the specter of social upheaval. The challenge remains for the working class to build a Cuban section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and to forcefully reject the predation of both American imperialism and the Cuban bureaucracy.



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