

Hundreds of Cuban and Haitian refugees arrive in Florida at the start of the new year

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5 January 2023

A surge of Haitian and Cuban refugees began arriving in the Florida Keys by boat at the end of December. Driven by desperate poverty and political violence to make the dangerous journey north, hundreds have been intercepted by US border authorities since the start of the new year.

In a statement released Thursday the Homeland Security Task Force announced that at least 1,300 refugees from those two countries had been detained by the agency between December 30 and January 1. This includes over 600 migrants who landed on one of the Florida Keys or the small islands nearby in small groups. The largest single group encountered so far consisted of 364 Cuban refugees who landed at Dry Tortugas National Park, a small island in the Gulf of Mexico west of Key West.

The agency also reported that it had encountered 606 refugees at sea across the same period and had prevented the departure of two “Haitian refugees and sail freighter departures near the north coast of Haiti.” Immigration officials have reported that the current wave of migrants from both countries is the largest it has been in years. Since August of 2022, the Task Force reported interdicting 7,784 refugees at sea and an additional 4,401 on land. Among that number there were 65 reported casualties.

The number of Cubans fleeing the island nation has increased exponentially over the past three years. The *Los Angeles Times* has reported that “Since the U.S. government’s new fiscal year began Oct. 1, 2022, about 4,200 have been stopped at sea — or about 43 a day. That was up from 17 per day in the previous fiscal year and just two per day during the 2020-21 fiscal year.”

The US/Mexican border has also seen a large increase in Cuban migrants seeking entry into America, with

approximately 220,000 detained by officials there across the last fiscal year, a six-fold increase over the previous year.

While the Cuban migrants often travel in smaller groups on makeshift vessels, Haitian refugees tend to travel in larger groups aboard larger boats, making them easier for federal border agents to intercept.

Two separate cruise ships conducting tours of the Caribbean participated in rescues over the new year’s weekend after encountering refugees at sea. One, *The Celebrity Beyond*, picked up nineteen Cuban migrants traveling in a small boat and brought them to border officials at its home port in Fort Lauderdale. Another, the *Carnival Celebration*, encountered five migrants 25 miles off the Cuban coast before transferring them to a US Coast guard ship.

Another group of more than a hundred Haitians traveling by sailboat landed on the beach near a gated community in Key Largo on Tuesday. A local resident who witnessed the migrants disembarking from the ship and swimming to land after the vessel reached shallow waters told the *Miami Herald*, “As soon as it ran aground, people started diving off the ship, and they started swimming and walked to shore.”

From the time of the Cuban revolution in 1959 through 1994 most Cuban migrants who reached US territorial waters were granted asylum in the United States. Beginning in 1994 the US established the so-called “wet foot, dry foot” policy, which allowed Cubans who reached US soil to remain but required those intercepted at sea to be detained or returned. The Obama administration ended that policy in 2017, ostensibly permitting the deportation of Cuban migrants. However, due to the lack of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries there is no formal mechanism for repatriating Cuban migrants.

There are a small number of Cuban refugees who claim they are fleeing political persecution and can potentially be granted permanent residency if approved by an immigration court. The majority however, who tell border patrol officials that they migrated for economic reasons, are given the status of “expedited for removal.” They are typically set free and can obtain work permits, drivers licenses, and Social Security cards, but cannot become citizens or permanent residents and must regularly report to federal authorities.

Approximately 225,000 Cubans arrived in the US in 2022. This is the largest number of migrants from that country in decades, exceeding the number who migrated during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 by 100,000. Already subject to grinding poverty due to the US trade embargo, the Cuban economy has been devastated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Tourism dropped from over four million visitors a year before the pandemic to just 1.7 million last year, depriving the country of much of the hard currency it needs to pay for imports. Cuba typically imports between 60 to 70 percent of its food on an annual basis, at a cost of \$2 billion per year. Imports have declined by more than 40 percent since 2019.

Sugar production in Cuba, the other major pillar of the island’s economy, has also been affected by the pandemic. Unable to acquire adequate levels of pesticides, fertilizers, fuel, spare parts, and other agricultural necessities the 2021-2022 sugar harvest totaled only 474,000 tons, fifty two percent below the previous year’s harvest of 800,000 tons, which was the lowest since 1908.

Inflation in Cuba has skyrocketed, reaching an official figure of 160 percent this year. The country’s power grid, already under severe strain since US sanctions on Venezuela slashed oil imports to Cuba in 2016, is on the verge of collapse.

Conditions in Haiti are worse still. Already the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, the country has been in a state of near collapse for years. Since the assassination of former president Jovenel Moïse in July of 2021 and the subsequent installation of Ariel Henry in his post by the imperialist powers the country has been racked by violence. Much of the country is currently controlled by criminal gangs linked to factions of the Haitian bourgeoisie. There were at least

1,448 deaths due to gang violence in 2022, as well as 1,005 kidnappings for ransom, according to official government statistics. The gangs are said to control seventy percent of the capital of Port-Au-Prince and in September and October of 2022 conducted a blockade of the Varreux fuel terminal, leading to fuel shortages throughout Haiti.

The violence in Haiti has recently been cited by Henry and his imperialist backers to demand a new military intervention by the imperialist powers.

The country is also in a state of near famine due to a reduction in food imports and gang control of transport routes. The Cholera epidemic, which first broke out in 2010 after an earthquake that year killed tens of thousands, has also resurged in recent months, killing 290 and infecting another 14,000 since October.

Since the beginning of the pandemic the US government has invoked Title 42 of the Public Health Act to restrict immigration, under the pretext that migrants “may carry a communicable disease”—specifically COVID-19. The Trump administration used the law to further carry out its campaign of violence and repression along the southern border, and two million immigrants have been deported under its authority since 2020. When the Center for Disease Control and Prevention announced last year that COVID-19 no longer presented a serious enough threat to public health to justify Title 42, nineteen Republican attorneys general filed a hypocritical lawsuit demanding the policy remain in place. In December, the US Supreme court issued an order extending the policy until the court issues a final decision in June.

On Thursday the Biden administration, which has continued to carry out the Title 42 deportations, announced new restrictions on migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.



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