

Department of Transportation  
Statement of Rear Admiral Norman T. Saunders  
Chief, Office of Law Enforcement and Defense Operations  
U.S. Coast Guard  
on Coast Guard Cuban Migrant Interdiction Operations  
Before the  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
Committee on International Relations  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I am Rear Admiral Norm Saunders, Chief of the Coast Guard's Office of Law Enforcement and Defense Operations. It is a pleasure to appear before you today to represent the Commandant, Admiral Robert E. Kramek. Today, I will discuss the Coast Guard's role in discouraging dangerous vessel departures and deterring illegal immigration from Cuba, as well as the impact the recent change in the disposition of Cuban migrants has had on the Coast Guard. I know first hand the realities of Coast Guard operations regarding Cuban migrants, as I have been responsible for operations in the Seventh Coast Guard District, located in Miami, as well as commanded cutters and shore units in this area.

There are four points I'd like to make today. First, the Coast Guard is the nation's premier maritime law enforcement agency, and we play a key role in immigration law enforcement by interdicting undocumented aliens at sea. We are also the nation's premier agency for the safety of life at sea, and as the Cuban migrant interdiction mission is typically a blend of safety of life at sea and law enforcement, the Coast Guard is uniquely suited for this mission.

The Coast Guard has been involved in enforcing U.S. policies regarding Cuban migration since the port of Camarioca was opened by Fidel Castro in the fall of 1965. We were also heavily engaged during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 in which some 125,000 Cubans arrived into the U.S. More recently, in August and September of last year, the Coast Guard conducted Operation Able Vigil in which over 30,000 Cuban migrants were rescued at sea and taken to safe haven at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

On May 2, 1995, the Attorney General announced that the U.S. and the Republic of Cuba had reached an agreement on steps to further regularize their migration relationship. This statement contained two elements. The first stated that the two governments had agreed that the process of humanitarian parole for those migrants in the Guantanamo safe haven should continue beyond the existing criteria. This does not directly involve the Coast Guard, so I will not address that aspect of the joint statement. However, the second part of this statement declared that, effective immediately, Cuban migrants intercepted at sea and attempting to enter the U.S. would be returned to Cuba. This directly involves Coast Guard operations.

My second point is that our operations are not significantly changed by this announcement. Coast Guard maritime patrol operations consist of many phases, including detection, monitoring, interception, recovery and disposition. Many missions are conducted during these patrols, such as search and

rescue, counterdrug, fisheries, marine environmental protection and migrant interdiction. The joint statement announced a change in the disposition of Cuban migrants, that is, simply where and to whom the Coast Guard transfers Cuban migrants rescued at sea. Therefore, Coast Guard operations remain largely unaffected.

Compared to the previous disposition guidance for Cubans intercepted at sea, which was to take Cuban migrants to Guantanamo Bay, the return of Cubans to a port on the north coast of Cuba reduces the transit time of our cutters by about a factor of four. With the transit time out of the operating area now significantly reduced, the entire patrol process is expedited, which means a cutter can return to the patrol area more quickly. With all else constant, this results in more efficient migrant operations.

My third point is that, although it is too early to reach any definite conclusions, we expect the deterrent value of this statement to reduce the number of Cubans attempting the dangerous journey across the Florida Straits, and so reduce the number of migrants in distress at sea. Prior to the joint statement, the number of Cubans intercepted at sea by the Coast Guard this year had started to increase as winter subsided and the weather improved. In March of this year, three Cuban migration events occurred with a total of 25 Cubans intercepted by the Coast Guard. In April, 16 events occurred involving 189 migrants. Based on historical observations and an analysis of the Cuban

situation, we had anticipated more events in May than in April. However, since the statement was announced and implemented on May 2, there have been substantially fewer events intercepted by the Coast Guard than expected (only four events involving 47 migrants as of May 17, 1995).

We are optimistic that this disposition practice will encourage Cubans to utilize legal migration procedures and not take to the seas in overloaded and unseaworthy vessels in illegal immigration attempts. Thus, we expect this disposition practice will enhance the safety of life at sea, deter illegal immigration, and because less Coast Guard resource time will now be spent in transit, also result in more effective Coast Guard patrols.

As to my fourth point, the Coast Guard has implemented the guidance set forth by the Attorney General in her statement of May 2, 1995. Those migrants intercepted at sea are advised they will be taken back to Cuba where U.S. officials will meet them at the dock and assist those who wish to apply for refugee admission to the U.S. at the Interests Section in Havana. They are told the Government of Cuba has provided a commitment to the U.S. government that they will suffer no adverse consequences or reprisals, and that only those individuals who apply through the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and meet the requirements, will be certain of entering the U.S.

Persons claiming a genuine need for protection which they believe cannot be satisfied by applying at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, are examined by an officer from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service aboard a cutter in the operating area. The officer determines whether the individual possesses genuine fears for his or her safety that would justify a decision not to return. A Coast Guard officer has been assigned to the U.S. Interests Section in Havana as a liaison to assist in coordinating the operational details between the Coast Guard, U.S. Interests Section, and Cuban Border Guards for the return of the migrants.

In summary, as the nation's premier maritime rescue and law enforcement agency, the Coast Guard plays a key role in enforcing the immigration laws and policies of the U.S. We have fully implemented the operational changes engendered by the announcements on May 2, and they do not degrade our maritime patrol operations, but rather enhance the effectiveness of our patrols. As a result, we anticipate this practice will reduce the number of Cuban migrants attempting the dangerous journey across the Florida Straits, and so enhance the safety of life at sea as well as reduce illegal immigration to the U.S.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions.