

Immigration Officials Prepare For Haitian Influx

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MIAMI (AP) — U.S. authorities are readying for a potential influx of Haitians seeking to escape their earthquake-wracked nation, even though the policy for migrants remains the same: with few exceptions, they will go back.

So far, fears of a mass migration have yet to materialize. However, conditions in Haiti become more dire each day and U.S. officials don't want to be caught off guard.

Between 250 and 400 immigration detainees are being moved from South Florida's main detention center to clear space for any Haitians who manage to reach U.S. shores, according to the Homeland Security Department. The Navy base at Guantanamo Bay could house migrants temporarily — far from suspected terrorists also being held there — and the Catholic church is working on a plan to accept Haitian orphans.

Homeland Security spokesman Sean Smith said Monday that orphans who have ties to the U.S. — such as a family member already living here — and Haitians evacuated for medical reasons are among those who can gain special permission to remain in the U.S.

The mass migration plan, known as "Operation Vigilant Sentry," was put in place in 2003 because of previous experiences with Caribbean migrations, said Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Chris O'Neil, spokesman for the Homeland Security Task Force Southeast that would manage any Haitian influx.

"There is no new incentive for anyone to try to enter the United States illegally by sea," O'Neil said. "The goal is to interdict them at sea and repatriate them."

The message was underscored by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano during a weekend appearance at Homestead Air Reserve Base south of Miami, a key staging area for Haiti relief flights.

"This is a very dangerous crossing. Lives are lost every time people try to make this crossing," Napolitano said, addressing Haitians directly. "Please do not have us divert our necessary rescue and relief efforts that are going into Haiti by trying to leave at this point."

Some immigration advocates say the U.S. should shift away from stopping migrants and ease safe passage. They say those on approved waiting lists should be able to join spouses or relatives in the U.S.

"We should be figuring out an orderly transition for people to come here, instead of being panicked about it," said Ira Kurzban, a leading Miami immigration attorney.

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The Obama administration's decision last week to grant temporary protected status to Haitians in the U.S. illegally as of Jan. 12 does not extend to those attempting to enter the U.S. after that date.

So far this year, the Coast Guard has intercepted 17 Haitians at sea, all before the earthquake struck. The 2009 total of 1,782 was higher than any year since 2004, when more than 3,200 Haitians were stopped attempting to reach U.S. shores. That was a year of political upheaval in Haiti following the collapse of the government of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Cuba is responsible for the biggest mass migration from any Caribbean nation: more than 125,000 Cubans streamed to the U.S. in 1980 after former President Fidel Castro opened the port of Mariel to anyone who wanted to leave.

U.S. policy notwithstanding, the Catholic Church in Miami is working on a proposal that would allow thousands of orphan children to come permanently to this country. A similar effort launched in 1960, known as Operation Pedro Pan, brought about 14,000 unaccompanied children from Cuba to the U.S.

Under the plan dubbed "Pierre Pan," Haitian orphans would first be placed in group homes and then paired with foster parents, said Mary Ross Agosta, spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Miami.

"We have children who are homeless and possibly without parents and it is the moral and humane thing to do," Agosta said.

Officials said many details would have to be worked out and the Obama administration would have to grant orphans humanitarian parole to enter the U.S.

Associated Press writers Matt Sedensky in Miami and Larry Margasak in Washington contributed to this story.

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