



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 22, 2015

## More Coast Guard Cutters Sent to Turn Back Cuban “Rafters”

Additional Coast Guard cutters have been sent to the Florida Straits to turn back “rafters” escaping from Cuba, a U.S. official confirmed Wednesday, while U.S. migration rules dominated the first day of talks between U.S. and Cuban officials over normalizing relations between the two countries.

Cuba pressed for an end to the policy that grants legal residency to virtually every Cuban who makes it to U.S. soil. Cuban officials claim that policy, adopted after Fidel Castro’s revolution turned the island nation into a communist police state, has encouraged tens of thousands of Cubans to risk their lives on perilous seas on a journey of 90 miles or more to the coast of Florida. U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson issued a statement saying America’s “wet foot, dry foot” policy, shielding from deportation most Cubans who make it to the United States, remains in effect. But additional Coast Guard cutters have been deployed, he said, to stop Cuban and Haitian migrants from reaching the United States by boat or raft.



The number of rafters from Cuba has spiked since the December 17 announcement that the U.S. and Cuba would seek to renew diplomatic and normal trade relations that ended more than half a century ago. Some Cubans fear that U.S. recognition of the communist government, now headed by Raul Castro, will bring an end to the policy admitting the Cubans rafters who land on America’s shore. “I don’t want them to get rid of it,” Mile Nieves, a 42-year-old Havana resident, said of the “wet foot, dry foot” rule. “I’ve got my whole family there and I’m desperate to leave.”

American officials meanwhile pressed Cuba to take back tens of thousands of its nationals who have been convicted of crimes in the United States. No progress was made on that issue, according to an official who spoke on the condition of anonymity, Fox News reported. Josefina Vidal, Cuba’s head of North American affairs, called for an end to the “exceptional treatment that no other citizens in the world receive, causing an irregular situation in the flow of migrants.” Cuba wants “a normal relationship with the U.S., in the broadest but also in the area of migration,” she said.

In fact, the United States has for decades followed a policy of admitting and resettling refugees from tyranny, particularly from communist police states such as Cuba. If the Castro regime wants to stem the



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tide of thousands upon thousands fleeing its island prison, it should stop the imprisonment and execution of political dissidents and allow the kind of freedom and economic opportunity their refugees are finding in America. Wednesday's session was the first of three days of discussions between Cuban and U.S. officials. "Today's discussions prove that despite clear differences that remain between our countries, the United States and Cuba can find opportunities to advance our mutual, shared interests as well as engage in respectful and thoughtful dialogue," said the State Department's Alex Lee. Lee headed the U.S. delegation in advance of the arrival Wednesday afternoon of Roberta Jacobson, the top American diplomat for Latin America and most senior U.S. official to visit Cuba in more than three decades.

*Photo of Cuban refugees on a makeshift raft float in 1994: AP Images*



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