

Cuba: Potential Mass Migration Impacts

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Overview:

In recent years, the Monroe County Tourist Development Council (TDC) has been proactive in planning for a day that U.S. authorities lift the travel ban for Americans to Cuba. Those intentions are highlighted in a formal TDC marketing plan for an Open Cuba.

But a more immediate challenge rests in defining likely impacts on the Florida Keys tourism infrastructure, in the event of a mass migration event from Cuba. That event could be triggered by the announcement of the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, but Castro's death would not be the only factor that would trigger mass migration, according to several federal officials. There are other factors, such as major hurricanes, epidemics, economic conditions as well as political issues.

This document highlights research executed after talking with collaborating with local, state and federal law enforcement officials as well as Hispanic media sources.

What Will Happen:

When official word is communicated that Fidel Castro has died, there is likely to be significant spontaneous demonstrations and reaction to the news in the streets of Miami and perhaps other South Florida communities. This was proven last August, when Fidel Castro underwent stomach surgery and ceded power to his brother, Raul. The demonstrations and celebrations by Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans in Miami lasted several days.

While law enforcement officials have plans to deal with mass migration from Cuba to the United States, several sources stress that the death of Castro alone is not likely to trigger a mass exodus.

"Raul (Castro) is firmly in command (of Cuba) now," said a news executive at Miami's top Hispanic television station. "They don't think there will be any civil unrest, because the transition of power has effectively already occurred.

"I don't see a mass exodus, or another Mariel," he said. "It wouldn't be good for Raul or for the U.S."

In fact, U.S. authorities have made it clear that they won't permit mass immigration to America and they won't tolerate boats leaving U.S. waters to head for Cuba. Various agencies have been planning coordinated efforts to prevent such actions.

"Operation Vigilant Sentry" is the Department of Homeland Security's plan to react to any large movement of migrants towards U.S. shores from the south. The plan, developed, maintained and implemented by the Homeland Security Task Force South East, synchronizes responses from local, state and federal officials.

In early December 2006, 400 emergency officials and others held a Mass Migration Event tabletop exercise at the Broward County Convention Center. Amos Rojas Jr., South Florida regional director of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, said authorities want the public to respond with calm when Castro dies and stay off the streets — and seas.

"The message we want to send is, 'Do not throw yourself to the waters and try to head to Cuba,'" Rojas told reporters. "Be patient, the trip is very dangerous."

But the true answer is that no one really knows for certain.

"We don't know what will happen when he (Castro) dies," says James Brooks, spokesman for the Naval Air Station in Key West. "When you plan, you anticipate the worst-case scenario. Will something go on that makes thousands of people leave the island and take to the seas? Will others try to sail from Florida to help them? Will we have a very dangerous situation in the Florida Straits? Or will nothing happen?"

Another drill is planned in early March that will involve simulated operations on land, sea and air.

The Overseas Highway – Auto Traffic Flow

Despite some rumors, completely shutting down the Overseas Highway is not a viable option, according to the Monroe County Sheriff's Office. A more likely scenario, if there are significant migration efforts, is to closely monitor traffic and stop vehicles trailing boats. Monitoring points might be established in Florida City or other locations as determined by actionable intelligence.

"We don't want to shut down all business," said Colonel Rick Ramsey. "We just want to control people with boats."

Ramsey said efforts would begin with interviewing drivers of vehicles trailing boats and determining their intentions, especially those with boats in excess of 17 feet. If the situation became extremely intense, all boats and trailers might not be permitted to traverse the highway, until the situation eases.

If there was a large mass migration event, in the beginning, traffic could be heavy due to the transportation of federally provided supplies to support mass migration processing. There would also likely be traffic from family members traveling to Key West endeavoring to meet with loved ones.

Monroe County Emergency Management would be involved in any significant response to a mass migration incident, according to Emergency Management Director Irene Toner. Emergency Management would activate the Emergency Operations Center and would

coordinate for any support requested by the responding agencies, communications between local and state agencies (including an activation of the emergency information hot line for public information), as well as a close coordination with the Department of Health until federal personnel arrived in the Keys. At that point, the county emergency staff would serve to support the federal effort.

It might take up to three days for federal officials to fully staff operations in the Keys, officials said.

Other local law enforcement operations, such as the City of Key West, are making preparations to deal with mass migrations, if necessary.

Coastal Waters/Marinas

Most law enforcement efforts will focus on the Florida Straits and other waters that surround the Keys and South Florida mainland.

Among options explored at the December tabletop exercise: closing all marinas in South Florida; shutting down airports and limiting fuel sales. But those are likely to be worst-case scenarios.

More likely, according to Key West U.S. Coast Guard Deputy Commander Gwen Keenan, is a situation where marine traffic would be restricted.

A security zone is one tool that exists to manage maritime traffic in the event of a potential for mass migration, Keenan said.

Such a security zone can entail an array of restrictions. Constraints might range from a temporary closure of all waterways, to restricted transit within a certain distance offshore (state or federal waters, three or 12 nautical miles respectively) or to certain types of traffic (closure of recreational traffic, while commercial traffic could continue) to no security zone and complete unfettered maritime traffic. The extent of the restrictions would be determined by the particular circumstances of the scenario. As is the case now, no U.S. private vessels would be permitted to legally travel to Cuba, unless the master or owner possesses a special permit from the federal government.

Keenan stressed that the Coast Guard would focus on safety of life at sea, border security, enforcement of laws and treaties — including the interception of migrants at sea — while balancing the maintenance of local, maritime-oriented commerce. The U.S. Navy would be positioned to augment Coast Guard efforts if required.

If a significant mass migrant event occurs, the Navy may be asked to establish a migrant processing station at Key West Naval Air Station, according to Brooks.

Airports

In a worst-case scenario, some, or all of general and commercial aviation channels could be

temporarily closed. But in minor and moderate scenarios, County Airports Director Peter Horton expects security would simply be increased at both airports, but does not anticipate a major physical interruption to commercial or general aviation service to Florida Keys Marathon and Key West International Airports.

When contacted, a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) official confirmed Horton's analysis and said the priority was to maintain commercial and general aviation routes over South Florida and the Keys, unless provided contrary direction from other federal agencies.

Immigration and Customs

"The goal of our agency is not to impede commerce," said Zachary Mann, senior special agent and spokesman for the U. S. Customs and Border Protection. "We want to make sure people that are going down to the Keys or are leaving from the marina are doing it for the right reasons."

Mann said right now the concentration is on prevention (of mass immigration) and education to deter people from illegally participating in migration activities. In that regards, officers might be stationed at boat ramps and marinas to make certain boaters are appropriately informed.

"We don't want to shut down marinas, boat ramps and airports," he said. "That would be a worst case scenario, if citizens and residents in South Florida blatantly violated the law."

Mann said plans in place provide different responses predicated on various scenarios.

Potential News Media Coverage

Media coverage of the reaction of Castro's death will be voluminous, worldwide in scope and lasting as long as demonstrations and celebrations last. While most coverage will probably focus on Miami, coverage can be expected in the Keys with reporters waiting to see if migration is attempted and covering actions of various enforcement agencies. In the event of significant migrant flow to South Florida, the Keys would most likely be the focus of media attention as it was during the 1980 Mariel boatlift and another boatlift in 1994.

Most major news organizations have been planning for the day of Castro's death for years and most have already made arrangements to execute coverage from the Keys.

In the event of mass migration, Joint Information Centers would be established both in Key West and Miami, according to Lt. Commander Christopher O'Neil, who manages public information for the Coast Guard in Miami.

In Summary

It seems most clear that there is no definitive vision as to events that will follow after the announcement of Fidel Castro's death, whether it's in the next few days or years. What is clear, is the following:

1. Fidel's death alone should not trigger a mass exodus from Cuba.

2. Officials will make maximum efforts to thwart mass immigration from Cuba to the United States, as well as to prevent U.S.-based boats from leaving ports in South Florida and the Keys to head to Cuba.
3. Responses from officials will be predicated on events in Cuba. Specific scenarios are required prior to implementing procedures that would impact land, maritime and aviation traffic in and around the Keys.
4. Human safety, protecting U.S. borders and ensuring commerce are priorities for local, state and federal officials.

From a tourism standpoint, tourism resources could be requested to assist in a major crisis. Hundreds of federal/contract works are likely to come to the Keys and will require lodging and meals. Ground transportation resources might also be needed.

The TDC's public relations agency has established relationships with local and federal agencies and is positioned to assist in the communications' effort. We believe TDC PR involvement with officials will aid their cause, help quell rumors; protect the safety of our visitors and aid the effort to maintain appropriate tourism flow to the Keys.

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