
Cubans cross Central America for Mexico and US border

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A group of 180 Cuban migrants stuck for months in Costa Rica blazed a new air-land route to Mexico on Wednesday that they and national officials hope will help bring nearly 8,000 other stranded compatriots to new lives in the US.

The path involved an overnight flight from Costa Rica to El Salvador, thus skipping over Nicaragua, a Cuban ally that has closed its border to Cubans since mid-November.

The 109 men and 71 women were then put on four buses bound for Guatemala and then the Mexican border.

Once there they will receive 20-day visas to make their way to the border with the United States, which has a policy dating to the Cold War allowing entry to Cubans fleeing their Communist-ruled island.

The journey -- organized by regional governments and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) -- was billed as a pilot scheme that could be expanded to the 7,600 other Cubans still stuck in Costa Rica by Nicaragua's border closure.

Costa Rican officials were visibly relieved at the sign of progress toward clearing out some of the Cubans filling shelters on their territory.

Yet Costa Rica and the other governments involved are insisting that each migrant pay the trip's \$555 cost, leaving open the question of what will happen to those without funds.

And 2,000 other migrants remain stranded in Panama by Costa Rica's own mid-December decision to close its border to any more Cubans. They will have no access to the air bridge.

- Fear of Mexican gangs -

According to Costa Rica's migration service, 28 flights would be needed to transport all the Cubans from the 38 shelters now housing them. The government hopes to organize two flights a day.

Cubans in the first group told reporters of their elation at being on their way.

They were seen disembarking from a plane in El Salvador with broad smiles and carrying small bags.

Some have also expressed fear over their passage through Mexico, where they could become prey to vicious narco-gangs.

"We've heard a lot that in Mexico there are gangs like the Zetas that make attacks on roads and that there are dangerous zones," said Yordani Casanova, a 33-year-old who left his herbal drinks business in Cuba to journey to the United States with his wife.

One worried Cuban woman, 28-year-old Liana Cabezas Gonzalez, said she would take a domestic flight in Mexico to reduce that risk.

Others unable to pay for that option would have to brave a cross-country road trip that would take at least a day.

Many of the Cubans have already experienced extortion and kidnapping threats on their northward odyssey, which started in Ecuador and put them on smuggling routes.

Many complained of Colombia in particular, where they said corrupt police stopped them regularly to take their money.

But for all the dangers, none wavered in their determination to make it to the United States.

- Money, food running out -

For the thousands of Cubans remaining in Costa Rica, the departure was cause for hope and celebration.

"This is a blessing. If all goes well with this trip, we others will soon be able to travel," said Joel Gonzalez, a 34-year-old Cuban staying in a shelter on the grounds of a Methodist church in the northern town of Liberia.

But there was anxiety among those unable to come up with the money to continue their travels.

Another Cuban in a shelter in Liberia, Yandy Herrera, said: "I have just 4,000 colones (\$7.50) in my wallet. I can't even call my family in Cuba because it's expensive: it costs more than a dollar a minute."

Costa Rica was a "VIP country" with prices to match, he said. "Everything is so expensive, and we don't have the right to work."

Many in the shelters said they needed to get to the United States and to find employment as soon as possible so they could bring family from Cuba.

"I came with my wife and my three-year-old daughter, and I have four more kids in Cuba. I need to work to send them something," said Wesnier Cuenca, 47, in another shelter in Liberia.

Food was running out for their group, being looked after in a Methodist church which had not received government aid.

"We have enough rice for three days, then that's it. I don't know what we're going to eat if we aren't able to leave," Cuenca said.