



11 Cuban migrants rescued off South Florida coast after raft falls apart; 2 still missing

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NEAR ELLIOT KEY, Fla. – The U.S. Coast Guard helped nine stranded men who were pulled out of the water near Elliot Key, off Biscayne Bay National Park, Monday, while two are still feared missing. Two others made it to shore.

Airplanes circled the air over Biscayne Bay Monday after a good Samaritan notified authorities of the situation sometime after 10 a.m. Monday, according to the federal authorities. The first three men were found clinging onto a raft and were pulled onto a tugboat. Others were taken away by plane after baskets were lowered to save them.

All of the rescued men are Cuban migrants. According to officials, there were a total of 13 migrants who were stranded in the water, about three to four miles off Elliot Key. Nine were rescued, two made it to land on their own and multiple agencies are still searching for the two who remain missing.

Two of the discovered men are recovering at Mercy Hospital in Coconut Grove, where an official said they were in stable condition late Monday afternoon.

"Right now, their condition is considered stable at this time," said City of Miami Fire Capt. Ignacious Carroll, "but we're not sure just how long they've been out there or what type of injuries that they have."

A third man was turned over to U.S. Customs and Border Protection while the Coast Guard continues its search.

According to Miami-Dade Police, who are among the agencies participating in the rescue operation, the migrants left Cuba on their raft a week ago to about 10 days ago. The raft then fell apart near Elliot Key several days ago. It is believed that the men have been stranded in the water since then.

"Approximately a week ago, these individuals left Cuba in a raft," said City of Miami Police Deputy Chief Luis Cabrera, "and as they reached Elliot Key, the raft came apart. They were in the water anywhere from a day to two, and they were rescued, and they were able to make land."

Several agencies responded to this rescue effort. Even boaters joined in to help. A fisherman was seen throwing a bottle of water to one of the men floating in an inner tube.

Richard Hartley of U.S. Coast Guard 126 said his department was the first to respond and found the first three migrants.

"The first person that we pulled out of the water was able to tell us that 13 people originally departed, and then we started saying, 'OK, we have one. We're missing 11. No, there's two more, so now we're missing 10.' And, then, like I said, the two pleasure craft were able to locate five more people in the water."

As of Monday evening, the Coast Guard was still out there, searching for those last missing migrants. First responders communicated before the initial rescues, according to recordings provided by the Coast Guard. One man is heard saying: "Once you get them on board, as quickly as possible try to find if anyone else was on board the vessel still in need of assistance."

It is still unclear whether the migrants rescued will be allowed to stay in the country. Under the wet-foot-dry-foot policy, Cuban who reach land in the U.S. are allowed to stay in the country. Those who do not reach the U.S. mainland on their own are repatriated.

"I receive a lot of call practically every day from relatives, many of whom never find their loved ones," said Ramon Saul Sanchez of Democracy Movement. He said Cubans risking their lives to travel to the United States underscores the failing reforms on the Communist island.

"There is an asylum exodus taking place where a lot of people are losing their lives in the straits of Florida, unfortunately," he said.

The condition of the two men yet to be located is unknown, but agencies are still searching for them.

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