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Costa Rica shuts down borders for Cubans en route to the United States

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The decision leaves 1,001 undocumented Cubans already detained at Costa Rican border crossing in limbo

Costa Rican migration authorities have said that they recorded 2,549 undocumented Cuban arrivals in 2013; 5,114 in 2014; and 12,166 in the first nine months of 2015



Hundreds of Cubans await their fate at Paso Canoas, Costa Rica's southern border crossing with Panama. Courtesy de Álvaro Sánchez

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Special for el Nuevo Herald

SAN JOSÉ, Costa Rica. In a decision that cut off an exodus of undocumented Cubans toward the United States, Costa Rica has shut off its borders to Cubans without visas and said that those caught sneaking in will be returned to neighboring Panama.

“Costa Rica is cutting off that chain at this time,” Kattia Rodríguez, director of the nation's Migration Department, told el Nuevo Herald Thursday. “We are notifying Panama about this flow, arriving in Costa Rica from Panama and moved by organized crime mafias.”

The decision falls hardest on 1,001 undocumented Cubans already detained in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica's southern border crossing with Panama. Costa Rican authorities started trying to return them to Panama on Wednesday, but as of Friday Panama was refusing to take them back, arguing that they already left its territory.

“Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!” some of the Cubans held at the Paso Canoas crossing chanted. They demanded that Costa Rica authorities return to its previous system of simply allowing the undocumented Cubans to continue their trip through Central America to Mexico and eventually the United States.

“We are practically abandoned here,” said Wilredo Llerandi, a 36-year-old from Havana. The Cubans tried Thursday to block the Inter-American highway, which runs through Central America, but a Costa Rican police riot squad negotiated a peaceful agreement.

“We have worked very hard to get here. We came from Ecuador as illegal migrants. We came through Colombia, where there are a lot of problems with police and corruption,” Rosalis Taboada, traveling with her seven-year-old daughter, told a local television crew.

“We had to ride buses, hide in houses, go through a lot of work, get on a boat at dawn, with the children really cold, a lot of risky places. We are here now, and we feel a lot better because we have risked our lives to reach Costa Rica,” added Taboada, whose itinerary was very much like those of the other undocumented Cubans.

“It's difficult for a mother to make her children go through that, but it's harder to stay in that country (Cuba) because it doesn't just have economic problems. It has political problems,” she added.

The tensions in Paso Canoas could turn worse because another 300 undocumented Cubans were expected to arrive soon there, the main border outpost between Costa Rica and Panama.

Migration order

In her order, Rodríguez said that the Border Police have stepped up their presence and vigilance along southern Costa Rica and are under orders to detain undocumented Cubans “so they can be immediately returned to Panama, from where they are arriving.”

Authorities also have not ruled out the possibility “of carrying out some deportations to the home country, that is, Cuba, and the respective arrangements and coordination are being carried out,” she added.

The flow of Cubans northward through Central America and eventually to the United States started in 2008, when Ecuador dropped its requirement that Cubans obtain visas before traveling there. Cubans now travel legally from Havana to Ecuador, then move illegally through Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico.

Many of the migrants use people smugglers to guide them and bribe local officials. Some countries, such as Panama, Mexico and Costa Rica until Wednesday, allow Cubans who are detained to declare that they plan to ask for asylum, then set them free and give them up to 20 days to move on to the next border.

Costa Rican migration authorities have said that they recorded 2,549 undocumented Cuban arrivals in 2013; 5,114 in 2014 and 12,166 in the first nine months of 2015. Honduran migration officials told el Nuevo Herald they recorded 4,128 undocumented Cubans in 2014 and 15,341 in the first 10 months of 2015 alone.

The flow of Cubans has spiked in recent months because of fears that the improved U.S.-Cuba relations will lead to a change in the U.S. Cuban Adjustment Act, which allows island natives to obtain U.S. residence after just one year and one day.

International people-smuggling ring

Rodríguez said there was another problem with nearly 200 Cubans — male and female adults as well as children — who were detained in the last day or two in Peñas Blancas, Costa Rica's northern border crossing with Nicaragua.

Those Cubans were smuggled from Panama into Costa Rica by an international people-smuggling ring broken up by Costa Rican authorities in recent days, and never registered at Paso Canoas as potential asylum seekers, she said. They must return to San José to declare that they will seek refugee status.

Costa Rican authorities arrested 12 local men and women during the crackdown and said the smuggling ring had paid collaborators in Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala and the United States.

“These nearly 200 Cubans suddenly turned up in Peñas Blancas because they lost the help of the network of smugglers that was to move them on to Nicaragua,” Rodríguez said. “They didn't know what to do, and were spotted.”

Some of the 200 Cubans already returned to San José, filled in the paperwork for asylum and were transported back to Peñas Blancas, so they could be deported to Nicaragua.

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