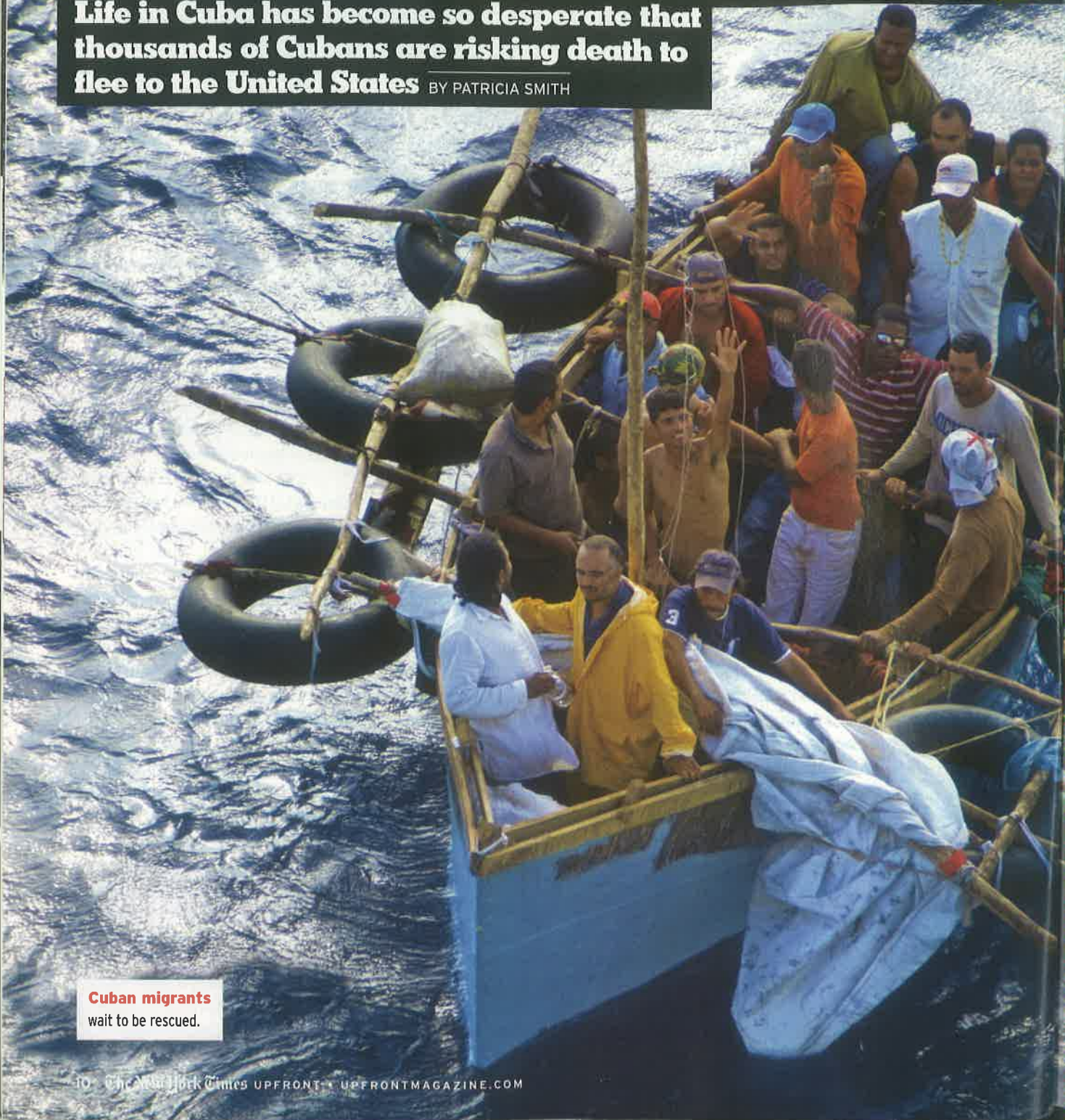


INTERNATIONAL

DANGEROUS Crossing

Life in Cuba has become so desperate that thousands of Cubans are risking death to flee to the United States BY PATRICIA SMITH



Cuban migrants
wait to be rescued.



Leonardo Heredia tried and failed eight times to get from Cuba to the shores of Florida, just 94 miles away.

In October, on his ninth try, the 24-year-old baker finally made it. He and 21 friends from his Havana neighborhood applied lessons learned from their previous attempts and made a boat from a Toyota motor, scrap steel, and plastic foam. They used a pocket-size Garmin GPS to navigate the shark-infested waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

“Things that were bad in Cuba are now worse,” Heredia says. “If there was more money in Cuba to pay for the trips, everyone would go.”

He’s part of a rising tide of Cubans fleeing the island nation—many in rickety cobbled-together boats. About 25,000 Cubans arrived in the U.S. last year without travel visas. In the past two years, the number of Cubans attempting the dangerous crossing to Florida has nearly doubled. Hundreds have died when their boats capsized.

U.S.-Cuba Relations

Why are so many Cubans risking their lives to get to the U.S.? It’s a combination of growing frustration with life in Cuba and recent reforms that have loosened travel restrictions.

The exodus, as some are calling it, has reopened the debate about whether it’s time for the United States to rethink its policy toward Cuba. Official relations between the U.S. and Cuba have been frozen since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, when Fidel Castro and his band of guerrillas overthrew the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (*see Key Dates, p. 12*).

At the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Communist powers, Castro aligned Cuba with the Soviet Union, embracing its repressive political system, state-run economic model, and

hostility toward the U.S. He also nationalized, without compensation, American businesses in Cuba. In response, Washington imposed a trade embargo that remains in effect 55 years later.

Soviet aid kept Cuba’s economy afloat until the early 1990s. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba went into economic free fall.

Castro and his brother, Raúl, who became president in 2008 when Fidel’s health declined, have


long blamed the U.S. embargo for the woes of Cuba’s state-run economy. And though the Communist regime has been credited with progress in education and health care, Cuba remains a totalitarian state that stifles dissent, jails political opponents, and violates basic human rights. The press is controlled by the state, and most Cubans have only very restricted access to the Internet.

The joke is that the revolution’s three biggest failures are breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

There are often shortages of food and other necessities. (The joke in Cuba is that if education, health care, and sports are the revolution’s three greatest achievements, its three greatest failures are breakfast, lunch, and dinner.) Government salaries average about \$25 a month. Doctors make about \$67 a month.

Those who work in tourism and earn tips in U.S. dollars and those with relatives abroad fare better: There are 1.8 million Cubans in the U.S. who fled in waves after the revolution. Most live in Florida and New Jersey, and they send more than \$900 million a year to their families in Cuba.

Since taking over from his brother, Raúl Castro has implemented some reforms. First, he allowed the few Cubans who could afford them to buy cell-phones, computers, and DVD players. In 2010, he loosened restrictions to allow more private businesses. The following year, Castro announced that Cubans would be allowed to buy and sell homes and

 Watch a video on the history of U.S.-Cuba relations at www.upfrontmagazine.com

Key Dates CUBA & THE U.S.



1959 Revolution

Fidel Castro (*above*) and his guerrilla army overthrow a U.S.-backed dictatorship. Castro takes charge, with his brother Raúl as his deputy.

1961 Bay of Pigs

The U.S. backs the Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles, which fails to topple Castro. Castro announces he's a socialist and strengthens ties with the Soviet Union.

1962 Missile Crisis

President John F. Kennedy reveals that Soviet missiles are being installed in Cuba, bringing the U.S. and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. After 13 tense days, the missiles are removed.



1980 Mariel Boatlift

Domestic unrest prompts Castro to allow people to leave from the port of Mariel; 125,000 Cubans head to Florida before Cuba stops the exodus six months later.

1991 Soviet Collapse

The Soviet Union disintegrates. Castro loses his financial lifeline, and Cuba's economy crashes.

2008 New President

Two years after becoming ill and handing power to his brother Raúl, Fidel Castro resigns and Raúl Castro (*right*) formally takes over as Cuba's president. Over the next few years, Raúl Castro eases some restrictions on private business and allows real estate sales for the first time.



TODAY A New Exodus

Despite reforms, more Cubans are fleeing the island, reviving debate about whether the embargo should be lifted.

hire workers for private businesses for the first time since the revolution.

At the same time, Castro shows no signs of allowing political freedom. He may be eyeing the models of China and Vietnam—Communist countries that have successfully embraced capitalism while remaining authoritarian one-party states.

In 2009, President Obama made it easier for Cuban-Americans to travel to Cuba and to send money to their relatives. In the last few years, the easing of these restrictions has allowed Cuban-Americans to bring nearly \$2 billion worth of products a year into the country—everything from medicines and clothes to flat-screen TVs. That's on top of the cash they send to family in Cuba.

Time to Lift the Embargo?

The question is whether the U.S. should go further: Is it time to lift the embargo and normalize relations?

"The embargo has outlived its usefulness and become counterproductive," says Ted Henken, a Cuba expert at Baruch College in New York. "It helps the Cuban government isolate the Cuban people."

Opponents of the embargo say it also hurts American companies. While U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere have been investing in Cuba, the embargo prohibits U.S. businesses from joining in.

But opponents say ending the embargo would just help keep Cuba's government in power. Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican from Florida whose parents are Cuban exiles, has called remittances and travel by Cuban-Americans "perhaps the single largest source of revenue to the most repressive government in the region."

While the debate over the embargo continues, life for many Cubans is becoming more and more difficult.

"Cubans don't believe that their lives are going to improve," says Jaime Suchlicki, a Cuba expert at the University of Miami. "They are very disillusioned because Raúl Castro's changes have been very limited. They don't believe these changes are profound enough."

Increasingly, Cubans are voting with their feet, striking out for the U.S. Some



Old American cars, bought before the U.S. embargo, are a common sight in Havana.

who receive money from relatives abroad can afford to buy plane tickets, usually to Mexico or elsewhere in Central or South America, and then make their way overland through the U.S.-Mexico border. Last year, the majority of Cubans arriving in the U.S. (more than 22,000) came via Mexico.

Those without relatives to send money for plane tickets resort to boats. They set out north to Florida, or they try to make it across the Gulf of Mexico to the shores of Mexico or Central America, hoping to

reach the U.S. by land. Either way, the journey is dangerous—especially since most of the boats are homemade.

“We have seen vessels made out of Styrofoam and some made out of inner tubes,” says Commander Timothy Cronin of the U.S. Coast Guard. “These vessels have no navigation equipment, no lifesaving equipment. They rarely have life jackets with them. They are really unsafe.”

Under a policy known as “wet foot, dry foot,” those intercepted at sea are sent

back to Cuba. Those who reach land are allowed to stay and their residency applications are fast-tracked. (Cubans who come across the U.S.-Mexico border are given the same special treatment.) Most of the new arrivals stay in Florida, where an extensive network of services help them get established. The Cuban government has long argued that the policy lures many people into making the dangerous voyage.

Yannio La O, 31, a school wrestling coach who recently arrived in Miami, knows firsthand how harrowing the trip can be. He and 31 others left Cuba in late August on a boat that took three months to build. They ran into engine trouble, and the food they brought was contaminated by a sealant they carried aboard to patch holes in the hull.

They spent 24 days lost at sea. Nine people died and were thrown overboard, and six more got on inner tubes and disappeared before the Mexican Navy rescued the survivors.

“Even if half the people who leave from Cuba do not survive, that means half of them did,” La O says. “I would tell anyone in Cuba to come. It’s better to die on your feet than live on your knees.” ●

With reporting by Frances Robles of The New York Times.



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