

# U.S. set to avert mass Cuban migration

**REUTERS**

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By Tom Brown

MIAMI (Reuters) - U.S. authorities are set to prevent Cubans from flooding toward the United States if Fidel Castro's retirement triggers any attempt at a mass migration from the communist-ruled island, authorities said on Tuesday.

"We have our contingency plans in place," said Luis Diaz, a Miami-based spokesman for the U.S. Coast Guard.

"Operation Vigilant Sentry is what it's called," said Diaz.

He was referring to a government plan, brushed up since Castro fell ill almost 19 months ago, to prevent another wave of Cuban migrants from sailing toward U.S. shores as they did by the tens of thousands in 1980 and 1994.

Diaz said there had been no sign of any unusual boat traffic between Florida and Cuba since Castro stepped down, formalizing a temporary arrangement when he handed power to his brother Raul to undergo stomach surgery in 2006.

But he said the Coast Guard could draw on aircraft, vessels and personnel from across the Atlantic coastal region and even the West Coast if necessary to avert a mass migration across the Florida Straits that separate Cuba from Florida by just 90 miles.

"If we have a small influx of migrants, the response would not be that great. If it increases, the mechanism is built in to increase it according to the numbers," Diaz said.

The Coast Guard is authorized by presidential order to intercept U.S.-bound immigrants in the Caribbean and hold them anywhere deemed appropriate. That includes the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, which held 45,000 Cuban and Haitian migrants during the 1994 migrant wave.

Workers at the Guantanamo base are installing bathroom and electric fixtures at a tent camp site that could house up to 10,000 migrants by summer if needed, and there are plans for another camp site that could hold 35,000 more. The base is currently better known as the site of a U.S. prison camp for foreign terrorism suspects.

Ramon Saul Sanchez, a Miami-based Cuban exile whose Democracy Movement has previously launched small flotillas into waters near Cuba to support anti-Castro dissidents, said he had no such plans under the current circumstances.

"This right now, even though it is a step in a positive direction, is not yet the step that will prompt us to attempt to go to Cuba," said Sanchez of Fidel Castro's announcement he did not intend to return to power.

"Things remain the same. Raul Castro is still in control. Fidel Castro might not be fully in power, physically, but I am sure that he is still able to influence the government's decisions. And as long as he is alive and around, the hardline approach to things will continue," he said.

"I don't think this will trigger any kind of traffic at this point," said Sanchez, referring to possible migrant flows.

"This is not the event that triggers that activity right now," he said.