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White House Weighs Change to Cuba Policy

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 7 — With the fate of Fidel Castro still unclear, the Bush administration is looking for ways to prevent a possible surge in illegal immigration from Cuba while perhaps easing the way for some Cuban-Americans to bring their relatives to the United States.

Any effort by Cubans to enter the United States illegally by boat or other means will still be blocked, and officials are considering adopting a policy of rejecting new or pending visa applications for anyone caught trying to sneak in.

But the administration is considering setting up a system that would speed the immigration process for Cubans with close relatives in the United States who have entry applications pending, according to a report on Monday by The Associated Press that was confirmed by two federal officials.

The change would not necessarily increase the number of Cubans annually given permission to enter the United States, which is about 22,000, but it would give people with families here higher priority.

Before the Cubans could come to the United States, however, Cuba would have to grant them exit permits, said the officials, who asked not to be identified because no final policy decisions had been made.

Consideration of policy changes has been accelerated by the recent transfer of power from Mr. Castro to his brother Raúl.

The officials said another possible change would ease immigration for Cuban doctors who have gone abroad as part of a program sponsored by the Cuban government to send physicians to developing nations. But the United States would block immigration for Cubans with ties to the Castro government who have been involved in human rights abuses.

Russ Knocke, a spokesman for the Homeland Security Department, which oversees immigration enforcement matters, said that no changes had been made and that Cubans should not see these discussions as a reason to consider trying to enter the United States illegally.

“The administration continues to urge Cuban people to stay on the island and work for a democratic Cuba,” Mr. Knocke said.