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Haitians Dash to Freedom in Florida From Boat

By DANA CANEDY

MIAMI, Oct. 29 — About 200 Haitian refugees jumped off a stranded wooden freighter into the shallows off Key Biscayne this afternoon, lunging through chest-deep water in a scramble to evade the Coast Guard and the police and to complete their desperate journey to Miami.

With news helicopters capturing them live on national television, dozens of Haitians, many in their Sunday best, flooded onto a causeway leading to Miami, about a mile away, as police officers converged. Many refugees tried to jump into passing cars and pickup trucks, begging for rides.

Parents dropped children from the boat into the arms of other refugees and rescue workers. A pregnant refugee was taken to the hospital, the police said.

The boat arrived about 3:30 p.m. just off the Rickenbacker Causeway, which links Miami to Key Biscayne, an affluent barrier island community. The Miami police closed the causeway for about two hours, clogging rush-hour traffic as they searched for refugees under a bridge and in bushes.

"A lot of them were trying to get off the bridge and use any vehicle at their disposal to do so," said Delrish Moss, a police spokesman. "We will never know how many got away."

At a makeshift command post, officials from the Immigration and Naturalization Service processed dozens of detained Haitians, many wrapped in yellow blankets. The refugees



Police officers deal with refugees on Tuesday. The refugees' boat ran aground, and officers moved them ashore.

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were put on buses and taken to detention centers.

Coast Guard representatives said that the Haitians were generally in good health but that some suffered from dehydration. None were believed to have drowned.

Petty Officer Anastasia Burns said the Coast Guard had two aircraft and 12 vessels trying to find refugees. "We're doing a search of the entire area to make sure no people are left on the water that we may have missed," Petty Officer Burns said. "We are conducting a search effort to make sure we've rescued everyone. We have no reports of injuries or

fatalities yet."

When asked how a boat full of Haitians could have come so close to shore without being detected, a Coast Guard spokesman said the freighter was typical of those that clog the shipping lanes off Miami, and thus did not stand out the way an overcrowded passenger boat or raft might have.

One of them, Yolette Baptiste, a woman with two children, said she had paid someone to make the trip. "We were at sea for eight days," Ms. Baptiste said in Creole just before a police officer ordered her onto a bus.

Witnesses described watching a heart-wrenching struggle for freedom. "It was very frightening to see," said Mayra Vidal, 44, who lives on Key Biscayne and was driving on the causeway when she spotted the boat. Ms. Vidal said the children caught her attention, and one in particular "stuck out in my mind. This little girl in a party dress with two bows in her hair. It broke my heart. They dressed her up to celebrate."

Marleine Bastien, executive director of Haitian Women in Miami, a Haitian advocacy group, described similar scenes. "The children that we saw were shivering, cold and hungry," Ms. Bastien said. In Miami's Little Haiti neighborhood, people took to the streets with signs demanding that the detainees be allowed to remain in the United States.

That is unlikely. Under a Bush administrative directive that does not apply to refugees of any other nationality, Haitians seeking political asylum are held in detention centers pending the dispositions of their cases. All others are to be returned to Haiti.

Civil rights advocates and a growing number of lawmakers from both parties have criticized the policy as discriminatory. The immigrants' advocates said that today's events were powerful evidence of just how

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dire life in Haiti had become.

"Haitians will still risk their lives to make it here because things out there are so bad," said Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. "It's very difficult for them to apply for political asylum and it's very unfair. Fortunately, Cubans don't have to go through that."

By United States law, Cubans picked up at sea are returned to their country, but those who make it ashore are permitted to remain.

Immigration service officials did not return calls for comment today, but the agency has long said that the policy of detaining the Haitians is necessary to deter thousands from taking to sea in rickety rafts and flooding South Florida, or dying en route.

One man at the scene today said he understood what the Haitians were experiencing.

"I'm Cuban and I'm a rafter," said Daniel Marin, 39, a handyman from Hialeah who has been in South Florida since 1995. Mr. Marin said he had been leaving Key Biscayne when he saw the boat off the causeway and turned around. "I have lived that in my own skin," he said.

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