

Statement of Honorable William Lehman

Meeting with Black Elected Dade County Officials Concerning Haitian Refugees

February 8, 1989

I would like to thank all of you for coming today to discuss a very important problem in South Florida. Commissioner Barbara Carey is the chairperson of the Black Elected Dade County Officials. She is accompanied by Commissioner Miller Dawkins of the City of Miami and by Athalie Range, who is a former City of Miami Commissioner. They are here to discuss with us the unequal treatment of Haitians as opposed to other nationalities who seek refuge in the United States. The treatment afforded the Nicaraguans has been in sharp contrast to the Haitians, who are turned back at sea or imprisoned once they arrive in Florida.

Only this morning I attended a hearing on the subject of human rights in Central America, the Caribbean and South America. I asked representatives of human rights organizations about human rights in Haiti. They told me that the threat of persecution to Haitians who return to Haiti is real and severe. Death squad activity on the part of the Haitian military has expanded without impunity. Dead bodies are frequently left for hours in the streets as a means of intimidation to civilians. Yet, because of current federal policy, very few Haitians are able to successfully apply for political asylum.

We appreciate the willingness of representatives from the Department of Justice and the Coast Guard to meet with us today. I also especially want to welcome the newly-elected chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law, Congressman Bruce Morrison.

I will first ask the Members of Congress who are present if they have any statements they would like to make and we will then have Commissioner Carey make her presentation on behalf of the Black Elected Officials of Dade County. Following that, I would like the Administration representatives to give us an explanation of why the inequities exist; what the procedures are with regard to exclusionary hearings conducted at sea; and whether any changes in these procedures are anticipated. We can then have a question and answer period and hopefully find some common ground on how this problem can best be approached. At a minimum we want to be sure that the Attorney General takes into account the Haitian situation when he makes his recommendations to President Bush, as noted in today's Washington Post, concerning our policy towards Nicaraguan refugees.

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