

# The Cuban Commission

Three members of the Commission of Cubans, formed to represent Tent City inmates, have said that the lack of incidents at Tent City is proof that the "refugees" there are mostly law-abiding citizens who are seeking freedom and a better life. Alejandro Pino, a former professor at the University of Camaguey, who heads the commission, and speaks English reasonably well, said, "The problem is that in this small place we have a lot of different people with different ideas, and from different kinds of life in Cuba. Also, the conditions in the camp are bad: few bathrooms, one building for cooking and eating, no privacy."

Pino's position is that the relative harmony in Tent City is because the "trouble makers" or the "greedy" make up only a small percentage of the group. "Ninety percent of the people want freedom, a new life. The other 10 percent don't care about that, so they want to make problems."

Another commission member, Isis Acuna, a civil engineer, said the biggest problem is their uncertain future; that after three months here, their options were to go to Guantanamo, repatriate to Cuba, or go back to sea on their boats. They said their experience on the sea left them reluctant to take that course.

The committee members stressed that the "people of Cayman" have been extremely kind to them. But they maintain that the government position remains an arm's-length one. Said Pino, "I think they feel we must be a wall for the next exodus. By that I mean if they treat us in a certain way, that will be a wall to stop others from coming, and so their actions are based on that. The people in Cuba know about Cayman, and if you see you'll be here for two or three months, and then back to Guantanamo, you wouldn't come."

Pino emphasized that there are many misconceptions around the story of Cuba — "To understand the Cuban situation, you have to live there" — and that one of them is the belief that the Cubans' only interest is to get to America. "That is not so," he said. "Some have family in the U.S. and want to go there, but many will go anywhere once there is freedom. I don't say I will go only to the U.S. I will go somewhere else, gladly, right now, if it's free. Human rights in Cuba? It doesn't exist. I remember in the Criminal Code, there is an article about 'enemy propaganda' where you can't say anything, even in private, against the government; it's eight years in prison. If you say it to the media, it's 15 years in prison."

Acuna said, "Everybody talks about the jobs and the money, but most of these people are running away from Cuba to find freedom; that's what it is, freedom." Pino also made the observation that a surge in the refugee exodus under Castro appears to occur every 15 years. "We had the first one in 1966, with the boats from Camazioca. In 1980, we had the Mariel boat lift with 120,000 people. In 1994, we have this one. When you don't have human rights, the pressure builds up and builds up and then it blows."

Would they consider Haiti an option? "Why not? Before, when there was no freedom in Haiti, nobody would want to go there," said Pino, "but now that it is free it's possible that you will see some refugees going there. It is the closest place to Cuba." But mention of Haiti raised another point. Pino said, "How is it that in Haiti, where there was no freedom, the U.S. sent in troops to get rid of the generals, but in Cuba they don't send troops to get rid of Castro? Without Castro, we would never leave Cuba; it's a beautiful country. We are here because of Castro." ■

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