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The Caribbean Centrifuge: A Portent of Continued Immigration Growth

By Don Mann

Washington's agreement to increase Cuban immigration to at least 20,000 a year once again sacrifices much needed immigration restraint for foreign policy quick fixes. The administration's bending of the immigration law's eligibility rules is a reckless precedent that will encourage future concessions.

More seriously, Washington's policies toward both Cuba and Haiti betray its tendency to see only the short-term political and economic factors in the outflow of Caribbean peoples, ignoring the long-term social and demographic forces driving mass migration from the Caribbean's 22 island nations, whether rich or poor, democratic or dictatorial.

In the past decade, Caribbean island nations, with a total population of 35 million, have sent more than one million legal and illegal immigrants to the United States — one-sixth of the region's population increase over the decade.

The islands, with a population density five times that of the United States, now grow by 1.8 percent yearly and have a total fertility of 3.1 children per woman. Population density in Barbados, Jamaica, Haiti and the smaller islands matches or exceeds India's. Since 1983, the region's ratio of northbound migrants to population has been 35 percent higher than in Mexico, the world's largest single exporter of migrants to the United States.

What must be confronted is that immigration pressure from the Caribbean is likely to continue growing whatever the outcomes of local political and economic conflicts. The islands' combined population is projected to increase to 50 million by 2025, while the labor force of that region grows by 300,000 restless, would-be workers each year.

Years of heavy migration from the islands and a pervasive U.S. cultural presence in the region have created both widespread expectations of settlement in the U.S. and the extensive kinship, ethnic and employer networks needed to make it happen. For millions, the United States is now an alternative homeland.

Improved political conditions will not make a decisive difference. The democratization of Cuba, by ending current travel controls, will open the valves for release of pent-up immigration demand. Immigration from the Dominican Republic, now the region's largest single immigrant-sender, has grown relentlessly since constitutional government replaced decades of dictatorship in 1966. Jamaica, with a consistently

admirable record of democracy and human rights since independence, now sends 43 percent of its annual population growth to the United States.

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Neither does economic progress necessarily dampen immigration demand. Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, among the third world's richest nations, together send a third of their annual population growth to the United States. Economic growth in Haiti would further increase outmigration by giving tens of thousands the means to pay travel and resettlement costs.

The immigration culture that has mushroomed in the Caribbean is a warning. It shows how years of expansive family reunification and refugee policies and tolerance of illegal immigration can acquire the momentum of a mass population transfer. Similar migration momentum now exists in the Philippines and is rising in China and India, a troubling portent for U.S. population growth. Migration from China at just one-third the Caribbean rate would bring one million immigrants yearly. If the U.S. is to bring its population into balance with its resources and environmental limits, current immigration must be cut dramatically. The route to environmentally permissible immigration levels is through elimination of all illegal immigration and an airtight ceiling of not more than 100,000 yearly on legal migrants and refugees.

It cannot be in the country's interest to admit the nearly four million relatives of United States' residents now on waiting lists abroad. The extravagant and unrealistic family reunification features of current immigration law that create such unrealistic expectations for millions and that feed Caribbean-type mass population transfers must end. Finally, Washington policymakers must recognize immigration control as a major national interest in itself, not as a bargaining counter for diplomatic tinkering. ■