

**Article from the *Cayman Net News*, George Town, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands (U.K.)**

**Cuban Refugees Cause Stir**

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Gun Bay residents have criticised what was described as, "inhumane treatment," of 13 Cuban refugees by immigration officials on Friday morning.

The refugees consisting of nine men, two women and two boys aged 6 and 12, were on route to Honduras when engine trouble forced them to stop at Gun Bay at around 7:30 am.

Local fishermen towed them to shore and provided them with some food and water while they tried to sort out their boat's mechanical problem.

About 45 minutes later, a convoy of police officers and immigration officials arrived at the scene. Gun Bay resident Henry Harris explained how the Cubans, who showed no hostility, were treated badly by officials. Mr Harris said, "It was completely unnecessary to have so many officers at the scene and the way they treated the refugees was like they were prisoners. It was brutal and inhumane."

Berna Cummins, who lives next to the Gun Bay dock, was able to translate for the refugees and felt that the way they were treated goes against human rights. "Immigration officials would not let me give them a five gallon tank of water or food supplies," said Mrs Cummins, adding, "All they needed was some diesel, a compass and a boat part. We were organising it for them. I cannot understand why the officials would not let them go on their way."

Immigration officials explained to the residents that the Cayman Islands had an agreement with Cuba to send back refugees. When Ms Cummins pointed out that when a similar incident happened in Cayman Brac this did not occur, an immigration official said, "Cayman Brac is a different country."

According to eyewitnesses, when the refugees were asked to get into a police van to be transported to Northward Prison, one of the men put a knife to his throat and threatened to kill himself rather than to face the prospect of being sent back to Cuba, where he said that he would be killed. Police officers managed to calm the man and he was then also transported to the prison.

On witnessing the course of events, Mr Harris said, "Where are the human rights in Cayman? These people weren't even planning to stay in Cayman. They shouldn't have been taken away."

Four of the Cubans were later treated at the Cayman Islands Hospital for dehydration.

Assistant Chief Immigration Officer of Enforcement, Jeannie Lewis, confirmed that the refugees were in good health and the men were being held in Immigration custody at Northward Prison, and that one of the women was being held at Fairbanks Prison, while their claims were being processed. The woman with two children are at a private government facility.

"It is the policy of Cayman Government that we look into these matters," said Ms Lewis, adding that she could not say how long it would take for the refugee's claims to be processed. She also said she did not believe that they would come to any harm if they are sent back to Cuba.

Officer Lewis declined to comment about the claims by residents that the refugees were treated badly.

Media Liaison Officer with RCIP, Kafarra Augustine said, "The whole situation was handled very professionally and apart from the knife situation, there were no major incidences."