

The New York Times

31-08-16

Editorial Board

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/opinion/neighbors-question-cuba-migration-policy.html?_r=0

Neighbors Question Cuba Migration Policy

Nine Latin American governments this week called on the United States to end its preferential immigration policy for Cubans, calling it “discriminatory” and a boon to human smuggling networks in the region.

In a rare public letter to Secretary of State John Kerry, the foreign ministers of Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru requested a high-level meeting to discuss a policy that they said is fueling the “disorderly, irregular and unsafe” migration of Cubans through their countries.

Under the policy known as “wet foot, dry foot,” Cubans who reach American soil are generally allowed to become permanent residents within one year and to apply for citizenship after six. Those apprehended at sea are turned back.

This policy was established in the 1990s, when thousands of Cubans were fleeing by boat because departures from the island by air were tightly controlled. Since 2013, when Havana lifted the exit travel permit requirement for its citizens, tens of thousands of Cubans have embarked on long journeys to the United States, often by first taking a flight to another country in the region and then making their way to Mexico’s northern border. The number of Cubans admitted to the United States has grown sharply each year since 2013. More than 125,000 have been resettled here over the past four years.

This migration has spawned human smuggling operations across South and Central America and strained the resources of countries that have had to provide shelter to the thousands who get stranded along the way — often for several months. Ecuador was a favored starting point until Quito began requiring Cubans to obtain visas last November. Since then, the tide has shifted to tiny Guyana, which continues to admit Cubans without visas.

“Encouraged by the U.S. ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy, Cuban migrants often become victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and violence,” Guillaume Long, the foreign minister of Ecuador, said in a statement. “It is time for the United States to change its outdated policy for Cuban migrants, which is undermining regular and safe migration in our continent.”

Even as the Obama administration has taken bold steps to normalize relations with Cuba, it has been reluctant to rescind the Cuban immigration policy, fearing that a change would set off an even larger exodus. But delay will make this nettlesome problem only worse. If the Obama administration refuses to act, the issue will have to be resolved by the next administration.

As it stands, this anachronistic policy is irrational, strains relations with America’s neighbors and endangers lives. It also has the effect of easing pressure on Cuba’s authoritarian government to make economic and political reforms by offering an incentive to those who are most dissatisfied with the status quo to take a dangerous way out.