

National Immigration Forum

FAX MEMORANDUM

February 11, 1998

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To: Haitian Working Group

Fr: Jocelyn McCalla
Christina Foley

Re: **Reminder of "Share the Cost" Conference Call Thursday, February 12, at 3:00p.m. (Eastern Time) to get Updates on the Haitian Legislation**

Please call Qamar Abdi at the NIF (202) 544-0004 ext. 43, if you do not receive 2 pages

The purpose of the call will be to receive updates on the Haitian legislation including information about the **White House meeting, Representative Carrie Meek's meeting with NGO's, and lobby visits.**

Attached is an article from Monday's *Washington Times* that discusses the politics of the Haitian issue.

To get on the call, dial (703) 736-7308 and ask for the National Immigration Forum conference call. The confirmation number for the call is 753318.

To join the call you must have an account code. Please call Qamar Abdi at (202)544-0004 ext. 43 by 12:00 p.m. on Thursday, February 12, to get an account code or if you have forgotten your code. You will not be permitted on the call without a code.

Haitians' immigration status may be political Pandora's box for officials

By Sean Scully
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Congress soon will return to a politically touchy question left unanswered in the 1996 immigration law — whether to allow tens of thousands of Haitian refugees to stay in the United States.

The Haitians, along with Hondurans, were left out of last year's sweeping amnesty granted to Nicaraguan and Cuban refugees, exempting them from the tough deportation rules created in 1996. Also last year, Congress granted a partial reprieve to El Salvadorans and Guatemalans, but left all other groups subject to the new rules.

"This is a fair country, we shouldn't have a double standard," said Rep. Carrie P. Meek, Florida Democrat and leader of the effort to bring Haitians and others under the amnesty.

But there is a formidable force standing in the Haitians' path: Rep. Lamar Smith, Texas Republican and chairman of the immigration and claims subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee.

Mr. Smith grudgingly accepted the amnesty for Nicaraguans and Cubans but is in no mood to accept further exemptions.

"The Haitians have been treated very generously by the immigration law," a committee spokesman said. Historically, as a percentage of the nation's population, more people from Haiti have been admitted to the United States as refugees than from any other country, he said.

Although not a high-profile issue with the public, the debate over the Haitians threatens to expose some raw spots in Congress.

While they are reluctant to say so too forcefully — for fear of jeopardizing their chance of expanding the amnesty — black legislators complain that the Haitians are being mistreated because they are black.

"I would like not to think that anything is racial in this colorblind society we are being asked to live



Rep. Lamar Smith

in," said Rep. Melvin Watt, North Carolina Democrat, the ranking Democrat on the immigration and claims subcommittee, "but I haven't been able to find any rational basis for the distinctions that are being made."

About 95 percent of Haiti's 6.6 million residents are black. Cuba and most Central American nations have relatively few blacks, generally around 10 percent, although about half of Cuba's population is racially mixed.

Mr. Smith and supporters of the amnesty for Nicaraguans and Cubans say those refugees are a special case: They were fleeing Communist regimes and sometimes were even active in fighting the Communists.

"It was a consideration of the circumstances, not anything racial or anything political," one Republican staff member said.

But if it isn't racial, it may be political.

Since the 1960s, 90 percent of black voters have supported Democrats. Republicans, meanwhile, fear they are losing support in the large Hispanic community be-

cause of their stands on immigration.

Therefore, some congressional staff say, the Republican-controlled Congress would see little advantage in admitting the black Haitians, who could eventually apply to become voting citizens. And by helping the Central Americans, the GOP could shore up support among Hispanics.

Such demographic calculations on the part of Republicans may be "just an unintended consequence" of pragmatic politics, one Democratic aide said.

Last year's amnesty allows Nicaraguans and Cubans who lived in the United States before December 1995 to remain as legal residents. It allows Salvadorans, Guatemalans and citizens of Eastern European nations who were in the United States by late 1991 to be treated under the older, more lenient refugee rules.

It's not clear how many Haitians would be covered by an amnesty. The INS estimates there are as many as 40,000 Haitian refugees in the United States, although it admits the estimate is loose at best. Mr. Smith's office says there could be 200,000.

An estimated 300,000 Cubans and Nicaraguans were covered by last year's amnesty.

The fate of the Haitian amnesty is uncertain. There seems to be bipartisan support for it in the Senate, where Sen. Spencer Abraham, Michigan Republican and chairman of the immigration subcommittee, favors Democrat-sponsored bills that extend the amnesty beyond just Nicaraguans and Cubans.

"My feeling was that all these groups should have been treated the same way," he said, although he firmly rejected the notion that the difference was based on race.

In the House, the fate is less clear. The key will be Speaker Newt Gingrich, Georgia Republican, and Majority Leader Dick Arme, Texas Republican, who have yet to speak out on the matter.