

Congress passes bill to kill EEOC guidelines

WASHINGTON — The House and Senate have both passed a measure that directs the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to withdraw much-criticized proposed guidelines on religious discrimination. The Senate voted 88-10 Aug. 19 on a conference report approved a day earlier by the House in a 322-98 vote. The measure prohibits use of the EEOC appropriation to enforce the guidelines as proposed, but left open the door to revised religious harassment regulations. The congressional amendment says any new guidelines on religious harassment should be consistent with the First Amendment and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Irregularities viewed in Mexican elections

MEXICO CITY — Church officials and independent observers noted irregularities amid a large voter turnout in Mexico's national elections. While long lines at polling places throughout election day reflected an enthusiastic 70 percent turnout of Mexico's 45 million registered voters, some bishops, priests and lay Catholic activists joined the independent monitoring group Civic Alliance in noting problems nationwide. Early results from the government's Federal Electoral Institute placed Ernesto Zedillo, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, in the lead.

Despite dangers, pope wants to visit Sarajevo

COGNE, Italy — Pope John Paul II is firm in his desire to visit the Serb-besieged Bosnian capital of Sarajevo despite warnings from Bosnian Serb and Serbian Orthodox leaders that his life would be in danger. "The desire of the pope to visit Sarajevo is irrevocable," said papal spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls. The Vatican is weighing the situation and is awaiting a decision by U.N. military commanders whether a plane carrying the pope on Sept. 8 will be able to safely land and take off several hours later, he said. Navarro-Valls spoke Aug. 21 in the northern Italian alpine city of Cogne, where the pope was spending a brief vacation.

Monitors, spiritual help among Rwanda's needs

NEWARK, N.J. — Human rights monitors are desperately needed in Rwanda both for "national reconciliation and to achieve the early return of refugees from Zaire and Tanzania," according to a U.S. archbishop who recently spent 10 days there. Newark Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, who made the visit as chairman of the Committee on Migration of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the new Tutsi-led Rwandan government seems committed to re-establishing legal safeguards and protections for citizens. It should have the cooperation of other countries in monitoring their actions, he added.

Compiled from Catholic News Service reports.

Cubans' flight to U.S. swells aid centers

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Buses were unloading hundreds of would-be refugees around the clock at the U.S. Catholic Conference's Migration and Refugee Services processing center in Miami as a wave of Cubans swept into Florida.

So many fleeing Cubans were being referred to MRS for resettlement that the agency had to move out of its regular offices into a vacant theater, said Raul Hernandez, assistant director of special programs for MRS in Miami.

President Clinton announced Aug. 19 that Cubans would no longer be unquestioningly welcomed into the United States, tightening up a 30-year policy of admitting all Cubans whether or not they had permission to enter the country. The new policy will require Cubans to obtain asylum approval in order to be freed from detention.

Cubans who reach U.S. shores on their own or who are picked up at sea will join 15,000 Haitians in a safe-haven camp at Guantanamo Naval Base while they are processed "just like the others who come here," Clinton said.

Dictator Fidel Castro apparently lifted restrictions on leaving the country and thousands have fled this month, the greatest exodus from Cuba since the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Many attempt the 90-mile crossing to Florida on rafts made

of inner tubes and planks.

At MRS, Hernandez said he had just hired 11 temporary workers and the agency was operating 24 hours a day to keep up with the hundreds of Cubans who have arrived in the last few weeks.

In an Aug. 19 press conference, Clinton called Cuba's shift in policy "a cold-blooded attempt to maintain the Castro grip on Cuba" and said he would not allow a repeat of the Mariel exodus, in which 125,000 Cubans entered the United States.

Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles Aug. 18 declared an immigration emergency and demanded federal help in coping with the onslaught. That same day, Attorney General Janet Reno announced the change in policy, saying anyone entering without approval would be detained.

The Lawyers Committee for Human Rights was among organizations questioning the administration's plans to detain Cubans. Its asylum project coordinator, Stephanie Marks, said Cubans should be treated in the same even-handed manner as other refugees. That should mean all would-be refugees who can show a sufficient basis for seeking asylum should be allowed to enter the country and be given safe haven in the meantime, she said.

John Swenson, associate executive director of MRS, said the new policy toward Cubans is not a viable solution.

Meanwhile, the resources of MRS and

other service agencies were already stretched with the demands of processing tens of thousands of Haitians who are seeking asylum in the United States.

Even before the Cubans began arriving, resettlement offices in Miami were busy helping Haitians who have been cleared for asylum.

An MRS office in Cap Haitien, Haiti, stopped accepting new asylum applications in mid-August because about 1,000 Haitians who had been cleared to enter the United States were unable to leave the country.

Under a presidential order meant to discourage Haitians from taking to the seas in unsafe boats, only those who have been cleared through offices in Haiti are being granted U.S. asylum.

Asylum processing centers in Haiti are operated by MRS, World Relief, and the U.S. embassy. World Relief also stopped taking new applications.

Haitians intercepted at sea are being taken to a tent camp at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba, where crowded conditions and a lack of activity have been blamed for several skirmishes between refugees and U.S. military police.

Shep Lowman, director of international affairs and immigration for MRS, said the decision to stop taking new applications was a matter of avoiding adding to a backlog. Work is continuing on hundreds of applications already in the works, he said.

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