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# Haiti migrants: If only they had a golden arm

By **CARL HIAASEN**

US. immigration policy is a sporting proposition.

Some boat people get locked up. Some boat people get to play ball.

Jean-Ferdinand Monestime, who landed on Hallandale Beach on March 28, is in government custody awaiting an asylum hearing that will likely result in his deportation.

Francisely Bueno, who landed on Big Pine Key in August 2004, is pitching for the Atlanta Braves' AA farm team in Pearl, Miss. The lefty is here to stay.

Monestime arrived on a dilapidated sailboat after weeks at sea with 100 other weary and hungry Haitians, including 13 children and teenagers. Bueno arrived from Cuba on a speedboat with four other ballplayers, 13 other migrants and a smuggler at the helm.

Monestime and Bueno came to America for the same reason: to find a good job.

In order to stay, Monestime must prove to a judge that he faces political persecution if he returns to Haiti. Bueno didn't spend a day behind bars, and he didn't have to prove anything.

That's because the United States awards political asylum to almost all Cubans who reach the shores of Florida. Those who are intercepted at sea are usually returned to the island.

Bueno and his friends didn't reach the Keys the first time they tried. The speedboat was stopped by the Coast Guard, the athletes shipped home. A month later they launched again and made it.

No other boat people are permitted to stay here simply because they reach dry land. Cubans are treated differently because politicians of both parties covet the exile vote in South Florida.

There are many other dictators in the world besides Fidel Castro, yet our government doesn't open its arms to all who have fled those countries in search of freedom.

The "wet foot, dry foot" rule is a farce. Illogical, unfair and racist in practice, it's also been a boon to people-smugglers with fast boats, and to other profiteers.

## **Baseball contracts**

Last week, in a Key West courtroom, sports agent Gustavo Dominguez was on trial for allegedly masterminding the smuggling voyage that brought Bueno and the other ballplayers to Florida.

Prosecutors said Dominguez hired a convicted drug trafficker to help him plan and execute the trip. Once the players landed safely in the Keys, they were driven to California. There, according to the government, Dominguez got apartments for the men and began lining up professional baseball contracts.

Defense attorneys for the sports agent said he's innocent. They said he was acting out of compassion, not greed.

Unfortunately for Jean-Ferdinand Monestime, he can't throw a 95 mph fastball, or hit a slider out of the park. No American rich guys sent a go-fast to whisk him to Florida in the dark of night.

Monestime paid for his own passage, boarded the overcrowded sailboat and endured a rough, treacherous crossing that has claimed hundreds -- probably thousands -- of Haitian lives during the past three decades.

Those who've made it to U.S. shores have mixed luck, depending on the judge reviewing their case. Some have been allowed to stay in the United States, but many, many more have been deported.

Haiti isn't ruled by a dictatorship; it has a shaky government crippled by poverty, corruption and chaos. Despite the presence of U.N. troops, roving armed gangs terrorize the cities; in the countryside, the deadly threats are disease and hunger.

There is no place in the hemisphere more wretched or dangerous, and it's perfectly understandable why so many Haitians set out for Florida. They are not alone in this dream.

The U.S. Census Bureau says that 409,426 immigrants settled in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties between April 2000 and July 2006. That means that nine out of every 10 newcomers were from other countries, an astonishing statistic.

South Florida needs more people like the Sahara needs more sand, but our economy obviously has become reliant on foreign-born labor. No less plain is the fact that many builders, farmers and company owners will never turn down an immigrant work force.

Consequently, the government has no hope whatsoever of controlling the borders. The least we should demand, though, is an immigration policy that's humane, fair and free of favoritism.

Unaccountably, the Department of Homeland Security won't give Temporary Protected Status to Haitians awaiting deportation hearings. The TPS program was created specifically to provide haven for undocumented migrants who would face perilous conditions if sent home.

Haiti is such a violent place that the State Department advises Americans not to travel there, yet somehow it's all right to send Haitians back into the bloody chaos.

### **A shot at big leagues**

Church leaders and Cuban-American organizations have called on the government to grant temporary status to Jean-Ferdinand Monestime and the 100 others who scrambled ashore last month in Hallandale Beach, but all the migrants remain in detention. [See article by Archbishop Favalora.]

Meanwhile, it's springtime, and in America that means baseball. Francisely Bueno will be taking the mound for the Mississippi Braves as a free man, hoping for a shot at the big leagues.

He's a very lucky young fellow.

Lucky to have a golden arm.

Luckier still not to have been born in Haiti.

