

169 ARRIVE IN U.S. ON CUBAN AIRLIFT

Repatriates and Relatives in New Orleans Via Mexico

NEW ORLEANS, Dec. 29 (UPI)—A total of 169 United States citizens and their Cuban relatives, repatriated with the help of the Mexican Government arrived in the United States from Fidel Castro's Cuba today.

They came in two flights from Havana across the Gulf of Yucatan to Mérida, Mexico. The Mexican Government, the only one in the hemisphere that maintains relations with Cuba, arranged the flights. Then a Pan American World Airways Boeing-720 jet flew them in two trips, of 88 and 81 persons respectively, from Mérida to New Orleans.

Federal officials in New Orleans refused to let newsmen talk to the arrivals as they stepped off the plane. Reporters were permitted to watch the refugees clearing customs but could talk to only one family at a news conference.

Refugees Are Silent

Most of the refugees, fearful of saying something to harm the 3,500 Cuban-Americans still within Cuba, seemed to prefer the Government's arrangement.

There were about 3,700 United States citizens of Cuban extraction and their dependents living in Cuba. United States officials hope to bring them all to this country.

Raul Lopez, a 36-year-old accountant from Havana, told the story of the flight. He was surrounded by his 26-year-old wife, Gloria; their children, Raul Jr., 4, and Gloria, 5, and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Mercedes Sabatier. Mrs. Lopez is the United States citizen in her family. She was born in Los Angeles.

Mr. Lopez said a Mexican Embassy official notified them at 10 a.m. Tuesday that they would be permitted to leave Cuba. One hour later, Mr. Lopez said, a Cuban Government official sealed their apartment. They were allowed to take only their luggage and personal items such as watches and rings.

Had to Give Up Job

Mr. Lopez said he had to give up his job two years ago when he expressed a desire to leave Cuba. He said he and his family planned to join his brother Rolando, a doctor, in Miami.

Relatives met some of the repatriates at the airport and took them away as soon as they cleared customs. Others were being cared for by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Some of the children had never seen this country.

The official Mexican statement announcing the airlift said Premier Castro had approved the exit of about 200 persons from Cuba.

The Communist leader denounced the refugees as the "supposed Americans" because of their Cuban blood.



Associated Press Wirephoto

ARRIVAL IN NEW ORLEANS: Woman carrying baby is among those leaving plane that brought repatriated U.S. citizens of Cuban descent, and their relatives, from Havana by way of Mérida, Mexico. The plane immediately returned to Mexico for more refugees.