

CNN AMERICAN MORNING WITH PAULA ZAHN

Cubans See Pope in Canada, Defect; Interview with Ismael Sambra

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BILL HEMMER, CNN ANCHOR: Pope John Paul II is in Guatemala this morning. Later he'll travel to Mexico as he continues his 11 day tour of the Americas, which started in Canada.

And in Toronto, the pope celebrated mass for world Catholic youth and in the audience there a group of about 200 Cubans who were selected by the Cuban government to travel to Toronto. Today, 23 of the young Cuban Catholics trying to become Cuban defectors. And now they have gone into hiding.

Frank Buckley now live in Toronto with more fallout from this story today -- Frank, good morning.

What more have we learned?

FRANK BUCKLEY, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Well, good morning, Bill.

We've learned that Canadian government officials had tried to prevent this sort of thing from happening in advance of the pope's visit to Toronto for World Youth Day activities by denying some 6,000 visa applications in advance of the pope's visit here. But apparently a very determined group of young Cuban Catholics had two agendas when they came here to Toronto. One, to see the pope, and, two, to move to Canada.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

BUCKLEY (voice-over): As Pope John Paul II was leaving Toronto, at least 23 young Cuban Catholics here to meet the pope at World Youth Day were attempting to stay in Toronto. Attorney Pamila Bhardwaj is advising 15 of them. She says they will be seeking refugee status.

PAMILA BHARDWAJ, IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY: They're defecting. That's the word we use.

BUCKLEY: The Cubans she has spoken with range in age from 19 to 25. All but two of them are young men. They were part of a delegation of 200 Cubans who were permitted to leave the communist island nation for the pope's visit.

BHARDWAJ: Their fears are being, number one, I guess being deported back. And, you know, they want to know how am I supposed to make a refugee claim.

ISMAEL SAMBRA, PRESIDENT, CUBAN/CANADIAN FOUNDATION: They are afraid for themselves and for their families in Cuba. Because you

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know, there are many suppressions, a lot of oppression in our country.

BUCKLEY: Ismael Sambra is president of the Cuban/Canadian Foundation. He says he and other members of his group began hearing from some of the young Cubans last week as the pope moved around Toronto. The would-be defectors hatched plans to slip away from minders, and Sambra and others helped them do it.

SAMBRA: They found good opportunities. And we suggested then to wait some time after the delegation leaves Canada.

BUCKLEY: The Cubans are now hiding in private homes in Toronto. In Cuba, there was no official government reaction. But church leaders there, who had professed confidence that all of the pilgrims would return to Cuba, said in a statement, "This action has left a bitter taste among the rest of the delegation."

Organizers of World Youth Day, which drew more than 250,000 young people from some 170 nations, said the defections didn't bother them.

ARCHBISHOP ANTHONY MEAGHER, PRESIDENT, EPISCOPAL COMMITTEE FOR WORLD YOUTH DAY: It seems to me the story here, when you have so many coming from so many countries, is just how few have tried this.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BUCKLEY: Now, Canadian government officials will not confirm that Cubans are intending to defect here. But, again, Cuban church officials have told us that 23 of their young members have indicated they do not intend to come home. And, Bill, eventually if these people do achieve refugee status, they can also apply for Canadian citizenship -- Bill.

HEMMER: That's an amazing twist on that story, Frank.

Thanks.

A lot of questions. Now for some more insight, the Canadian/Canadian Foundation is helping the 23 delegates defect. We just heard from them in Frank's story.

Ismael Sambra now with us live today from Toronto.

And, sir, we appreciate your time.

How much can you tell us about the status right now of the 23?

SAMBRA: ... young people here in Canada. But we hope that there are more after the delegation leaves Canada, more than 23.

HEMMER: All right, we missed the first part of your answer. You say there are more than 23, sir?

SAMBRA: More than 23, we hope that. HEMMER: Can you tell us how many, then, in total?

SAMBRA: I don't know exactly, the exact amount. But in actual conditions when the delegation leave Canada early in the morning, today in the morning, we hope there are more people than 23.

HEMMER: Yes, will Canada allow them to stay?

SAMBRA: Sorry?

HEMMER: Will the Canadian government allow the group to stay in Canada?

SAMBRA: Yes, we hope that. We hope that, that the Canadian government can accept all of them, because everybody knows that the actual political of this government is different than before with the situation with Cuba. It's different.

HEMMER: I understand that family members, relatives of the 23 came from Texas and New York and New Jersey to Toronto to help in the defection.

SAMBRA: That's right.

HEMMER: Can you tell us how much planning was involved here?

SAMBRA: I don't know exactly amount about how much. We know that, that somebody from the United States traveled to Toronto to help in their family here, to find a better place to live. But now they are in safe house, all the city.

HEMMER: Are they being held together?

SAMBRA: Not together. Not all together. In different houses. Different amounts of groups, a small group, four, three, two, one, separate in different houses.

HEMMER: There was a secure...

SAMBRA: We have contact with them sometimes.

HEMMER: Yes, there was security -- sorry about the delay in the satellite here. There were security personnel from Cuba traveling with this group of 200. How were they able to get away?

SAMBRA: Oh, everybody knows that they are together with delegation travel some Canadian security policy. This is the style of the Canadian dictatorship. And everybody knows that, but it's very hard for the people when traveling in some delegation to leave the delegation, to escape from the delegation to get the freedom. That's difficult. I don't think this now not possible to give back these, some people of the delegation, leave the delegation. Not possible to give on them. But the government in Cuba must recognize that there is a lot of repression there. That is the main reason these young people are asking for political asylum in Canada.

HEMMER: Now, I only have a few seconds left here. Are the defectors concerned about their families back in Cuba?

SAMBRA: If everybody knows that the story of the Castro dictatorship, if the Canadian government rejects all these refugees asking for asylum, that it's possible to receive reparation there. And these guys are afraid now, thinking in themselves and their families in Cuba, because everybody knows that the style of the Castro dictatorship is to repress the family of different ways, physical and psychological ways.

HEMMER: OK, we will certainly be in touch.

Ismael Sambra, again from Toronto, head of the Cuban/Canadian organization there, with an amazing twist on a story after the pope left on Sunday.

Thank you, sir, for your time today.

Twenty-three there. He says more may come. We shall see.

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