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Cuba: authorities should respect international human rights standards regarding the use of force

Following the reported highjacking yesterday of a Cuban ferry by armed individuals apparently aiming to get to the United States, Amnesty International is writing to the Cuban authorities to urge that they abide by their promise to respect international human rights standards regarding the use of force in responding to the situation.

Amnesty International welcomes the Cuban government's statement that it would not "use measures of force that endanger the lives of the people aboard the vessel."

This commitment is particularly significant in light of the 1994 sinking of the "*13 de Marzo*" tugboat, in which at least 35 people died, according to witness reports after having been rammed by an official vessel. The Cuban authorities denied responsibility for the tugboat's sinking. However, that incident has never been fully and impartially investigated, in spite of government commitments to do so.

About 50 people are believed to be aboard the ferry, now drifting in international waters north of the Cuban coast. The hijackers are reportedly demanding extra fuel to continue to the United States, and have threatened to throw passengers overboard, according to Cuban authorities. Cuban border patrol vessels are reportedly following the hijacked boat.

This incident follows the 1 April hijacking of a passenger plane by a Cuban man who claimed to be armed with grenades and the 19 March hijacking of another plane by six Cubans armed with knives. Both planes were diverted to the United States at the insistence of the hijackers. Cuban authorities had accused the United States of encouraging such acts by failing to punish the perpetrators and by granting legal status to most Cubans who arrive on US soil. In a statement yesterday, the head of the US Interests Section in Havana warned Cubans that they will be punished once arrived in the US if they have used force to leave Cuba.

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