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Wednesday January 12 12:14 PM ET

U.S., Canada Brace for Waves of Smuggled Chinese

By Chris Stetkiewicz

SEATTLE (Reuters) - U.S. immigration officials, bracing for new waves of illegal Chinese immigrants headed for West Coast ports, said on Wednesday they were boosting cooperation with Canadian and Hong Kong authorities to block the harrowing traffic in human lives.

Closer ties helped them to detect four ships carrying 63 stowaways, three of them already dead, at the Port of Seattle in the past week. Authorities expect more are on the way.

"That's certainly a possibility. We hope the smugglers will see that we are apprehending them and try a different method or hopefully stop doing it," said Irene Mortensen, a spokeswoman at the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Hong Kong authorities, announcing a string of measures to prevent the territory from being used for trafficking, said on Tuesday their tip-offs led to the U.S. arrests.

For the smuggled Chinese, their arrival in North America ended a hellish journey stuffed inside 40-foot-long metal containers with scant food or water for weeks. But their ordeal was far from over.

In jail for now, many might soon be deported to China where they could face arrest and violent threats from gangsters called "snakeheads" who they promised to pay up to \$50,000 for shipping them to jobs in New York or Toronto.

The INS acting director in Seattle, Robert Coleman, met U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno in Seattle on Tuesday and the two discussed border control issues, Mortensen said.

Canada's Immigration Minister Elinor Caplan said on Tuesday she would visit China in April to warn Chinese migrants that snakeheads would only exploit and enslave them despite their tantalizing offer of entry to America.

But immigration experts said desperate conditions at home and the lure of a new

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life overseas outweighed any doubts for many of the 80 million displaced rural Chinese who they said were seeking jobs in crowded cities.

“Even a trickle of the 80 million represents thousands. I would say we've just seen the beginning,” said Don DeVoretz, a professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and an expert on immigration.

Chinese immigrant smuggling will likely pick up when the weather warms and snakeheads can cram hundreds of peasants into rickety fishing boats, as they did last summer, ferrying them to Canada's West Coast, DeVoretz said.

Canadian officials have vowed to deport the migrants, including 25 found in cargo containers in Vancouver last week.

But Canada's immigration law allows them to stay if they apply for refugee status, which can include lengthy appeals.

China also refuses to take back boat people without official papers, which most have discarded, DeVoretz said.

“I suspect Canada will do something dramatic. They have to make a deal with China to take these people back,” he added.

In the United States the immigrants have no legal remedy, having committed a deportable crime. The established Chinese communities in both countries distance themselves from the poor, rural boat people.

“For the vast majority there is nothing any immigration lawyer can do for them,” said Greg Siskind, an immigration lawyer in Memphis.

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