

Metro News

White approves Chaffee report

By ELLEN DEBENPORT

LITTLE ROCK (UPI) — Gov. Frank White, who complained during his campaign that the Cuban refugee resettlement program at Fort Chaffee was being mishandled, said Thursday he is satisfied with a report from officials that the remaining 5,000 refugees can be sponsored within another six months.

Although the number of refugees being sponsored has slowed drastically since summer, White said, "They're coming out right now at a rate I'm willing to accept."

White had said during the campaign that he would ask President Reagan to scatter the refugees through other states so Arkansas would not have to shoulder the entire "burden." But at a Capitol news conference, White said only those refugees who can never be sponsored and need treatment will be removed from Arkansas in that fashion.

White, who met with Chaffee officials just before the news conference, also said he was satisfied with the security arrangements at Fort Chaffee.

Col. Bill Cook said "naturally a lot of tension" exists at the camp, where some refugees have been waiting nine months. Another riot like the one June 1 remains a possibility, he said, but "we feel we have taken precautions to contain that."

White also addressed several other topics:

- White said he is still committed to veto a bill to fund teachers' pay raises the rest of this year. But a compromise is being considered, he said.

"I've kept my options open," White said. "Obviously, we're looking at alternatives. I'm not prepared to say at this time (what a compromise might entail). I don't have to take any official position on it until Monday. I'm looking at what could be done and what can't be done."

Legislators are discussing a possible veto override if White makes good on his threat.

The bill would increase the state's contribution to teachers' salaries by \$370 this year, making up for a shortfall in state revenue.

- White laughed in response to a report that his aide, Sterling Cockrill, said White is a "complete amateur" who is "overwhelmed" by the duties of the governor's office. White said, "I'm trying hard."

Cockrill had warned White the "off the cuff" remark was made in a speech to a civic club Wednesday and was heard by a reporter, he said.

"I said, 'Sterling, don't worry about it,'" White said.

At Fort Chaffee, at least 630 refugees will never be sponsored, said David Lewis, program director of the U.S. Catholic Conference, the main volunteer resettlement agency at Fort Chaffee. They have physical and mental problems or drug and alcohol addiction, he said.

But as for finding sponsors for the others, Lewis said USCC offices nationwide would "guarantee the governor the job can be done and will be done."

Nearly 20,000 refugees have already been resettled. Those who remain are mostly single men aged 21 to 40 who have grade school educations and marginal training skills, Lewis said.

Lewis said the "most challenging of all humanitarian programs...will be concluded successfully."

Federal officials had originally said the camp would close Dec. 31, 1980.

White said he will discuss the Chaffee situation with a representative of the federal Department of Health and Human Services during the National Governors' Conference later this month.