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INS returns star baseball player to Cuba

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His dreams of freedom — and stardom — were shattered on Wednesday when U.S. immigration officials repatriated Cuban baseball star Andy Morales, along with 30 other Cubans who fled the island five days ago.

The group was just 25 miles south of the Dry Tortugas when a Coast Guard cutter intercepted them. A U.S. official in Washington said Morales was returned because he did not qualify for political asylum.

Morales, 25, is a third baseman who hit a home run last year in a 12-6 victory by the Cuban national team over the Baltimore Orioles in Baltimore. He is the latest of about 35 Cuban baseball players who have fled the communist island in

the past 10 years.

Three years ago, Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez was in a similar position to Morales after he was intercepted in the Bahamas while fleeing Cuba. He had already been suspended from Cuban baseball for life after being accused of trying to help other Cuban players defect.

Unlike Morales, Hernandez was granted asylum. He now pitches for the Yankees.

To qualify for admission to the United States, Cubans who attempt to flee must convince the INS they have a credible fear of persecution if they are returned. Under an agreement with Cuba, U.S. diplomats monitor repatriated Cubans to determine whether they are undergoing official harassment as a result of their decision to try to flee.

“Cubans, as a matter of course, do not reach the standard for asy-

lum unless they have been imprisoned,” said Jeffrey Brauerman, a Plantation immigration attorney and former immigration judge.

Morales’ father-in-law, Carlos Castillo, who lives in Miami, contacted sports agents, politicians and even two members of Elián González’s legal team to defend the ballplayer.

Castillo said Morales will face harsh reprisals in Cuba and be treated as a “traitor.” He said his son-in-law was not involved in politics on the island.

“In Cuba they do what they want,” Castillo said. “Now he’ll never be anyone. He won’t be able to play ball.”

Information from Sun-Sentinel wire services was used to supplement this report.