

Diplomats fall ill and US – Cuban relations deteriorate

By Tom Whitney

A report surfaced in August 2017 of U.S. diplomats in Havana who, beginning in November, 2016, were experiencing hearing loss, ringing in the ears, headache, nausea, dizziness, vision problems, mental confusion, and abdominal pain. A few heard harsh noises. The symptoms so far have affected 17 diplomats and four spouses, of whom three work in the embassy.

On September 29, the State Department ordered 60 percent of its Embassy employees to leave Cuba, but allowed 27 to remain to deal with emergencies. The Department claimed that U.S. diplomats are unsafe in Cuba. Henceforth most Cubans won't be able to secure visas for travel to the United States. The State Department issued a warning that U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba were putting their health at risk.

At the invitation of Cuba's government, FBI officers have been in Cuba carrying out investigations. A Canadian diplomat also showed up with symptoms. In May the U.S. government expelled two Cuban diplomats because of the situation.

State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert claimed, "[we don't know](#) who is responsible; we don't know what is responsible." Yet the original Associated Press report in August cited government sources in attributing the illnesses to a "[covert sonic](#) device." For Senator Marco Rubio "[acoustic attacks](#)" warrant expulsion of all Cuban diplomats in the United States, and, if need be, closing down the U.S. embassy in Havana. Secretary of State Tillerson, oddly enough, characterized the afflictions as "health attacks."

Much of the story rests on speculation. According to a neurologist [cited by the New York Times](#), "neither ultrasonic nor subsonic waves have been known to produce such injuries surreptitiously." He thinks viruses, poison, or radiation are more reasonable possibilities. A "fact-checking site on the internet," having comprehensively reviewed medical and scientific studies, [concludes that](#): "no single brand of sound could create the range of symptoms described by the victims of the Cuban health attacks ... we rank the specific claim that an inaudible sonic device adequately explains the health attacks in Cuba as false." John Sipher, a former officer of the CIA's Senior Intelligence Service, suggests that, "[this is more likely](#) a surveillance effort gone wrong, than the use of an offensive sonic weapon."

What about human causes of the maladies? Media in Spain and Latin America blame Cuba or dissident elements in the [the Cuban security services](#). [Other commentary](#) speaks of third countries — Russia among them — and Cuban-American counter-revolutionaries. Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy narrowed the parameters of speculation: "[Whoever is doing](#) this obviously is trying to disrupt the normalization process between the United States and Cuba. Someone or some government is trying to reverse that process."

What is certain, the [New York Times](#) reports, is that "the Cubans were rattled by what had happened and were desperate to find the cause." Indeed, the U.S. government's travel warning threatens Cuba's tourist industry, a major source of much-needed hard currency. Almost half a million U.S. citizens have visited the island so far this year, many more than visited Cuba in 2016. Some [240,000 Cubans](#) have traveled to the United States this year.

Observers predict that unavailability of visas for travel to the United States will keep Cuba's artists, diplomats, academicians, speakers, and students away from anticipated projects in the United States, also that diminished travel in both directions will hurt Cuban families.

The State Department actions will likewise interfere with ongoing negotiations on “bilateral cooperation,” in place since December 17, 2014. So far 20 agreements have been reached in [“various areas ranging](#) from environmental protection, to actions on mutual security, re-establishment of mail services, and direct flights.” Josefina Vidal, the Cuban foreign ministry official in charge of U.S. relations, lamented on September 29 that, [“the decision](#) announced by the Department of State is hasty and ... will affect bilateral relations.”

Most importantly, the recent State Department actions are consistent with President Donald Trump’s previous words and actions regarding Cuba. Speaking in Florida in June to announce rollback of some Obama policies, [Trump proclaimed](#) that: “The exiles and dissidents here today have witnessed communism destroy a nation ... Last year, I promised to be a voice ... for the freedom of the Cuban people ... And now that I am your President, America will ... stand with the Cuban people in their struggle for freedom.”

U.S.- based commercial airlines are continuing flights to Cuba despite the U.S. travel advisory. And the US Foreign Service Association, the union representing U.S. diplomats in the world, has protested the removal of embassy personnel in Havana.

An official Cuban government statement unmaskes the U.S. actions: “Cuba [“has not nor will perpetrate attacks](#) of any kind against accredited diplomatic officials... nor has allowed Cuban territory to be used by third parties for this purpose.” A Cuban journalist asks, “Where is the [logic in aggressive methods](#) against U.S. diplomats [now] after the sovereign decision to re-establish ties with Washington?”