

# Uncle Sam further restricts U.S. citizens right to travel

By Tom Whitney

The U.S. government under President Donald Trump on June 4 announced new restrictions on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba. They took effect on June 5. National Security Advisor John Bolton, speaking to Cuban-American Bay of Pigs veterans in Miami on April 17, had set the stage. He mentioned upcoming travel restrictions plus implementation of Title III of the 1996 Helms Burton Law and the lowering of remittances Cuban-Americans could to send to their families in Cuba.

Specifically, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the Treasury Department agency carrying out the U.S. economic blockade against Cuba, indicated on its website a ban on U.S. citizens engaging in group travel on people-to-people visits to Cuba. The Trump administration in November 2018 had stopped people-to-people travel to Cuba by individuals.

Additionally, the Commerce Department banned visits to Cuba by passenger and recreational vessels and private and corporate aircraft. The new regulations don't affect commercial airline flights to Cuba. They do block cruise ship visits to Cuban ports.

The idea behind people-to-people travel to Cuba, instituted under President Clinton, was that U.S. citizens, either as individual or in groups, could plan their own travel to Cuba. President Obama restored people-to-people travel after the George W. Bush administration had ended it. The purpose of people-to-people travel related to engagement with the Cuban people and the traveler's self-education, usually as regards culture, history, natural history, or his or her own intellectual interests.

It was a mode of travel beyond control by so-called traveler service providers that, licensed by OFAC, determine the content of group visits to Cuba and validate the purposes of individual travelers. Those agencies serve OFAC as enforcers of travel restrictions.

OFAC has allowed 12 categories of Cuba travel including journalism, family visits, religious activities, humanitarian projects, and "support for the Cuban people." One of them, "Educational activities/People to People," has been "the most common way for the average American to travel to Cuba," according to the head of Cuba Educational Travel, a large travel company. As of June 5, that category has disappeared from an official website, only to be replaced on another current list by "Educational activities (schools, students, teachers)".

Permeating OFAC's newly revised summary of Cuba travel regulations are reminders of previous Trump-administration rules requiring travelers to stay away from "180 state-run and military-owned companies" serving visitors to Cuba. OFAC advises legal travelers to ration activities reminiscent of tourism.

The intention behind U.S. travel restrictions is that of reducing the flow of income Cuba derives from foreign visitors. Newly tightened restrictions may well cause enormous damage to Cuba's economy. That's because, as one observer has it, tourism is "the most dynamic industry of the island's economy," it accounted for 10.7 percent of Cuba's GDP in 2017. Among foreign visitors, those from the United States are crucially important for Cuba.

More than 250,000 U.S. visitors traveled to Cuba in the first four months of 2019, up 93.5 percent over those months in 2018. Of the 1.93 million foreign visitors in these months this year, Canadians were tops at 624,530; U.S. Cuba travelers were second.

U.S. and other foreign visitors provide Cuba with hard currency, particularly dollars. That's no small matter what with Cuba's overwhelming foreign debt obligations, Cuba's obligation to maintain social services, and the new threat to foreign investment represented by brand new implementation of Title III of the U.S. Helms Burton Law.

Travel restrictions constitute one element of the U.S. economic blockade against Cuba, which aims at undoing a government not to U.S. liking. Tools are used — travel restrictions, for instance — that harass the Cuban people and destabilize Cuban society.

But, as is usually the case, U.S. spokespersons justify new blockade regulations in terms of policy objectives prevailing at whatever moment. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin thus mentions Cuba's "destabilizing role in the Western Hemisphere, providing a communist foothold in the region and propping up U.S. adversaries in places like Venezuela and Nicaragua." John Bolton claims that, "Cuba has continued to prop up the illegitimate Maduro regime in Venezuela." Florida Senator Marco Rubio speaks of "the Cuban regime's deceitful activities to undermine U.S. policy."

The Bipartisan Cuba Working Group of the House of Representatives sharply criticized the new Trump travel restrictions. Its co-chairpersons are Tom Emmer of Minnesota, Rick Crawford of Arkansas, and Barbara Lee of California, and Kathy Castor of Florida. Castor, a Democrat, issued a strong denunciation on her own website.

James Williams, head of the anti-blockade group Engage Cuba, condemned the new restrictions as interfering with the liberties of U.S. Americans and hurting Cuba's private sector.

Speaking for Cuba, Minister for Foreign Relations Bruno Rodríguez denounced the new U.S. effort "to strangle the economy and endanger Cubans' standard of living so as to pull out political concessions from us. It will fail, again."