

US Embassy in Havana sheds tasks as bilateral relations worsen

By Tom Whitney

The U.S. Consular and Immigration Services (USCIS), part of the Department of Homeland Security, announced recently that its “field office” in Havana will be closed as of December 10. The USCIS, with 19,000 employees and contractors worldwide, “[oversees lawful](#) immigration to the United States.” The impact of the action in Cuba is considerable. Now any Cubans wanting to emigrate to the United States will have to apply in person at USCIS office in Mexico City.

After negotiating with Cuba in 1994, the U.S. government [agreed to accept](#) at least 20,000 Cuban immigrants every year. The agreement is still in effect. But having now burdened potentially acceptable Cuban migrants with the necessity of traveling outside Cuba to gain permission, the U.S. government is clearly set to be violating terms of the agreement.

The announcement explained that, “attacks affecting the health of U.S. Embassy Havana employees” have led to “a drawdown in [Embassy] staffing.” During the previous year fewer than 20 of them had experienced the sudden onset of a cluster of neurological and auditory symptoms for which no cause has been found. As a consequence of reduced embassy personnel, USCIS since November 2017 has issued very few visas to Cubans for any travel by Cubans to the United States, even for short term visits.

The recent U.S. action causes grief for prospective migrants and their families. It also reflects both intensified U.S. hostilities against Cuba and generalized U.S. discomfort at the embrace of migrants. Cuban journalist Arthur Gonzalez explores other ramifications.

“[I]t [wouldn't be surprising](#),” he suggests, if the U.S. government “soon announces the total closing of its Embassy.” He notes that U.S. political, cultural, commercial interactions with Cubans were scanty in any case and were even more so after the Trump administration imposed further restrictions in 2017. Now with consular services having almost disappeared, the usefulness of a U.S. Embassy in Havana is not readily identifiable.

Formerly, as Gonzalez explains, a shuttered U.S. embassy would be good news for Cuba, at least in one respect. The Carter administration in 1977 established a U.S. Interests Section in Havana as an embassy equivalent. Its staff included CIA personnel posing as diplomats. They mined Cuban government agencies for collaborators. Until then the U.S. government had depended unsatisfactorily on the operatives of other, mostly European, governments to gather intelligence.

After a real embassy was established as part of the Obama administration's opening to Cuba, U.S. intelligence capabilities improved even more. Intelligence officers reached out to members of Cuban civil society: "agents without diplomatic cover worked with commercial enterprises, bank branch offices, tourist agencies, high tech organizations, etc."

The current situation is such that former CIA director Mike Pompeo could agree with the U.S. government's decision to remove U.S. diplomats from the Embassy after a few of them became sick. That's because of the expanded reach of U.S. intelligence activities in Cuba now. Intelligence work apparently can take place without support from a functioning U.S. Embassy. It's no longer necessary.