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## US Announces New Sanctions Against Cuba

by LADB Staff

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The decision by Mexico and Peru in May to recall their ambassadors from Cuba coincided with a White House escalation of the 44-year-old sanctions policy. The diplomatic crisis fits into White House plans to employ third-country support to isolate Cuba and replace the government of President Fidel Castro.

The UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) meeting in Geneva in April approved a resolution vaguely faulting Cuba on its human rights record (see SourceMex, 2004-05-12). The vote proved especially significant as it helped produce, or at least justify, the break in Mexico's traditionally strong formal relations with Cuba. For the third consecutive year, the administration of Mexican President Vicente Fox Quesada voted against Cuba on the US-generated resolution.

One effect of the annual US campaign to get a resolution against Cuba is to force Latin American states to choose sides, using the Cuba issue to undercut regional integration and political unity. Some states, like Argentina, have slowly mended relations with Cuba that were disrupted in the 1960s. But when Cuba's neighbors vote with the US, relations become dangerously strained.

In recent years, Castro has called Latin American presidents "bootlickers" and "Judases" for their Geneva votes. On May 2, Fox's Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez recalled Mexico's ambassador from Cuba and gave the Cuban ambassador in Mexico 48 hours to get out of town, alleging a confusing mix of Cuban interference in Mexican affairs. Since then, relations have been reduced to the consular level. Former Mexican ambassador Ricardo Pascoe dismissed the allegations of Cuban interference, telling Agence France-Presse that Fox had decided to follow the Bush administration policy of bringing down the Castro regime. "The Fox administration decided on a radical change and proposed chilling relations, those were the orders I received," Pascoe said.

### *A small victory for US Prying*

Mexico diplomatically away from Cuba was something of a victory for the US although not so much for its Cuba policy, which is internationally denounced, as for the tactic of what could be called outsourcing. Increasingly, the US has tried to enlist third countries in its efforts to condemn Cuba on one or another issue, usually human rights or the lack of US-style elections. An example of a significant success in outsourcing came during the administration of President Bill Clinton.

In 1998, Clinton secured an agreement with the European Union (EU) that drew it into the sanctions policy in exchange for dropping enforcement of some extraterritorial provisions of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act (see EcoCentral, 1998-06-04). Though remaining an important trade and tourism partner with Cuba, EU members have followed the hard line (Common Position) on Cuba set by Spain's former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar (see NotiCen, 2003-02-04). Bush's efforts have been less successful.

In 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell was ignored when he lobbied the Organization of American States (OAS) to press Cuba on the human rights and democracy issues (see NotiCen, 2003-06-19). Bush failed at a similar effort in Monterrey, Mexico, this year, and administration officials have been ignored or rebuffed in trying to individually pressure Argentina and other countries (see NotiCen, 2004-01-29). In Cuba-US relations, it is never certain whether actions like the Mexico-Cuba rift were driven by events or were essentially theatrical displays designed for electoral advantage. In the current situation, Fox's legion of critics in Mexico insists the diplomatic break was manufactured to better position his party in the 2006 presidential election.

Likewise, in the US, Bush's recently announced sanctions are widely seen as an appeal to Florida hard-liners in the 2004 presidential election. Whether manufactured or not, the diplomatic crisis was applauded in Washington and Florida. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush speculated that Mexico might become the leader of an anti-Cuba realignment in Latin America, and Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Mexico and Peru for their response to what he called Castro's "outrageous charges" against them for their Geneva votes.

### *Sanctions aim at reducing dollar flow*

During the week of Mexico's break with Cuba came the announcement from Washington of toughened sanctions against the Castro regime contained in a report from the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. Bush had created the commission in October 2003 and charged it with recommendations for "hastening" the end of the Castro regime (see NotiCen, 2003-11-20). There are few if any surprises in the commission's report released May 6.

The Helms-Burton Act had already spelled out in detail steps that a post-Castro Cuba would have to take, approved by the US president, before sanctions could be lifted. The commission report is essentially a gloss of Helms-Burton, spinning out scores of recommendations on how to deprive Cuba of dollars by undermining tourism, how to support opposition groups in Cuba, how to enlist "willing third parties" to assist the transition to a new government, how to advise the next government on elections, solid-waste management, health care, education, and street repair. The commission recommended spending up to US\$36 million of a total two-year US\$59 million budget for "democracy-building activities, support for the family members of the political opposition, and support for efforts to help youth, women, and Afro-Cubans take their rightful place in the pro-democracy movement."

Another US\$18 million would be spent on sending an EC-130 communications aircraft, known as Commando Solo, to patrol the coast of Cuba broadcasting signals from the two US propaganda outlets, Radio and TV Marti. US\$5 million would go for "public diplomacy efforts" to promote the US view on Cuba's human rights record, harboring of terrorists, "and other actions which pose a threat to United States national interests." Much of this is old stuff. But some recommendations have the potential for bringing about significant changes in the dynamic of anti-Castro politics, even to costing Bush votes among Miami Cubans.

To deny dollars to Cuba, the commission recommended a reduction in the annual permissible cash remittances Cuban-Americans can send to relatives in Cuba. Bush scrapped that proposal but

endorsed the commission's definition of what a family is. The new rules allow only grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, spouses, and children to receive cash and gift parcels. Allowable per diem expenditures on family visits to Cuba are to be cut from US\$164 a day to US\$59. The number of permissible trips by Cuban-Americans is reduced from one a year to one every three years.

Press reports from Florida soon suggested that Cuban-American voters regarded the new restrictions as detrimental to their relatives in Cuba. United Press International reported that the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights organized an unusual demonstration in Miami against the new rules.

## *Isolating Cuba*

A BBC News analysis asserted, as did some US media, that the diplomatic breaks by Mexico and Peru pointed to a deepening isolation of Cuba from its neighbors. Periodic speculation about Cuba's isolation conforms to the spirit and language of much of the anti-Cuba legislation. The commission's copious recommendations include several invocations of "willing third parties," countries and their nongovernmental organizations that are encouraged to back the toughened policy by contributing their own acts of isolation.

The report encourages such countries to challenge the Castro regime in international organizations presumably the Human Rights Commission in Geneva would be one and join in "proactive support" for dissident groups in Cuba, among other things. However, there is just as much apparent movement toward inclusion as toward isolation of Cuba. The BBC analyst minimized the growing ties Cuba has with Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela and ignored the protestations by Mexico and Peru that the recall of their ambassadors did not affect their ongoing stable relationships with Cuba.

Almost simultaneous with the recall of his ambassador, Derbez told Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque that he was anxious to resume full diplomatic relations. Furthermore, both countries announced their refusal to participate in Bush's latest offensive against Cuba as willing third parties. This year, three members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay abstained from voting at Geneva.

This was not a victory for Cuba so much as it was a statement about regional integration and resistance to US hegemony. Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa said his country's vote had nothing to do with "doing Cuba a favor." Rather, he said, it was based on "absolutely rational arguments." The Buenos Aires daily Clarin reported that government officials considered the vote to abstain a MERCOSUR vote. Sanctions get mixed reviews Critics of the upgraded Cuba sanctions apparently start with Powell, who chaired the commission.

In a GQ magazine interview, Powell's chief of staff Larry Wilkerson said that his boss thought US Cuba policy was the "dumbest policy on the face of the earth." Such an admission would seem to undermine the credibility of the heavy attack rhetoric in the report. But in a May 6 State Department press briefing, spokesman Richard Boucher said, "The secretary led the commission, worked with

the commission, prepared the report....The secretary and the president are working together on this new policy."

Four Senate Democrats and one Republican wrote Bush with a critique of the commission's report and suggested an alternate strategy that amounted to a thorough dismantling of the anti-Cuba policy. The senators "respectfully" differed with Bush on premises of the current policy: the belief that the Castro government is about to fall and that economic sanctions are effective tools. The letter also faults Bush for proposing to engineer a transition in Cuba from the outside.

In place of the commission's recommendations, the senators proposed an end to all restrictions on travel, people-to-people contacts, and remittances; restoration of presidential control over Cuban policy by repealing the Helms-Burton Act; and the use of diplomacy rather than force to resolve security issues, including drug trafficking and immigration. They recommended rationalizing US immigration policy, noting that homeland security concerns do not extend to the Cubans arriving illegally, who are not subject to security checks and to other normal procedures.

Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), one of the signers, called the current policy "an absurd and increasingly bizarre obsession with Cuba" and "a dangerous diversion from reality." Baucus also referred to press reports indicating that the Treasury Department was spending much more heavily to track US tourists illegally traveling to Cuba than it was to track the finances of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Baucus is among a group of senators currently sponsoring legislation to end the embargo.

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