

9-17-2009

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Recommended Citation

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U.S. President Breathes New Life Into Cuban Blockade

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: Thursday, September 17, 2009

The blockade against Cuba, seen by most countries as a failed anachronism, has another year to run. On Sept. 15, US President Barack Obama breathed new life into the 47-year-old policy with a flourish of a pen and these words, "I hereby determine that the continuation for one year of the exercise of those authorities with respect to Cuba is in the national interest of the United States." The decision was not a surprise to followers of Obama's policy statements. Despite a now somewhat-diminished reputation as a progressive, the president has long said he would not lift what the US calls an embargo on Cuba until certain conditions unacceptable to the island are met. The only US enemy The "certain authorities" the president cited are embodied in the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act (TEWA). The Helms-Burton Act, invoking TEWA, would have expired Sept. 14 without renewal. Obama's renewal was actually signed Sept. 11 but only released Sept. 15. The signing is misleading to some extent because Congress is required to take specific action under Helms-Burton to end the embargo. Extending TEWA a year does not, of itself, extend that. The decision may have been surprising to people who read into recent events a willingness to take the next step toward ending this odd anachronism. It is odd in the sense that Cuba is the only country on earth to be under TEWA restriction; it is the only country in the world the US regards as an enemy. Earlier in September, the US administration had enacted a series of measures widely seen as the beginning of the end of the widely reviled Cuba policy. The policies published Sept. 8 implementing new regulations were announced back in April (see NotiCen, 2009, 04-23). They ease restrictions imposed on Cuba in a number of areas. On travel, individuals can now make an unlimited number of trips to visit close relatives in Cuba, with no maximum length of stay. These travelers will be able to spend more money on the island, up to US\$179 a day, and their luggage weight limit is no longer restricted to 20 kg. Businesspeople in the agricultural commodity, medicine and medical devices, and telecommunications sectors may now travel at will, under a general license, without the need to apply for an individual permit from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). But they must give 2 weeks notice of an impending trip and account for their activities upon return. In telecommunications, the same general licensing applies to deals establishing fiber-optic, cable, and other links between the two countries and between Cuba and third countries. Payments, including roaming charges, equipment servicing, and others, are included. Providers must report establishing or terminating service, and the export of equipment to Cuba still requires a license from the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS). Requirements for these licenses have been loosened. For commodity, medicine, and medical-device sales, cash is still the mandated mode of exchange, but now foreign subsidiaries of US banks can finance agriculture deals. Loosening has also affected remittance traffic. Banks can newly act as forwarders of money without OFAC license, and family members can carry up to US\$3,000 on visits for remittance purposes. Most exports are still prohibited, but gifts and humanitarian donations to individuals and charitable, educational, and religious institutions of up to US\$800 are allowed, and the number of items comprising this category has been increased. Donations of consumer communication devices, cell phones, computers, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi equipment now get a pass from BIS. Experts caution, though, there are limitations and reporting rules in the new regulations, and institutions or individuals planning on taking advantage of them are advised to look into the specifics. Also among the cautionary

points, reporting on these revisions has in some cases been misleading. The Irish Independent, for instance, reported "new rules that have reversed a 50-year US embargo on the communist state." Not misleading, but perhaps too enthusiastic in light of Obama's latest action, have been reports of shifting sentiments among those in Florida and elsewhere who have helped keep the embargo in place through their traditional electoral might and power to hold administrations in thrall to the power to swing the national vote. State Rep. David Rivera of Miami was unswerving in his demands for embargo-as-usual at a Sept. 14 debate on the subject organized by the Tampa Bay Council of World Affairs and Commerce. Naples cattleman John Parke Wright IV argued for an end to the policy. Wright sells bull semen to Cuba and travels there frequently. Wright's support at the debate was nearly unanimous, influenced by the recession. The audience was composed largely of businesspeople with Cuban ties. They had, said the St. Petersburg Times, "little patience for a state legislator whose one-note foreign policy seems to be holding Florida's faltering economy hostage." Wright scored by pointing out, "Prior to 1960, over 50% of the Port of Tampa's trade was with Cuba. Cuba has been cut off by our heavy hand for almost 50 years." Dissidents decry interference The number of moderates on Cuba appears to be increasing even among dissident bastions on the island. One group, Arco Progresista (AP), is looking toward 2010 to stage its first congress, taking a year to prepare for what it calls strategic debates. The group is dissident against the communist government, but spokesman Manuel Cuesta told IPS, "We are facing new circumstances, both within and outside the country, which create better conditions for a climate of tolerance, especially with an approach like ours, which is progressive." AP calls itself social democrat and has declared itself a political party after a merger of a number of similar organizations in July 2008. A vice president of the group, Leonardo Calvo, said the organization is not seeking a change of government or replacement of any of its leaders but rather "a new kind of coexistence and to restore citizens' voice, space, and ability to determine their own fate." They are seeking agrarian reform to put land in the hands of farmers and the right for workers to form unions. A key to their success, said Calvo, is "a substantial change" in US policy. The opportunity for the "substantial change" that AP says it could help initiate is gone for another year with Obama's dictum. AP "reaffirms its opposition to the embargo and to meddling of any kind in Cuba's internal affairs." This organization is careful to set itself apart from others, particularly the Proyecto Varela, which sought change by promoting a petition to call a referendum on a slate of constitutional changes. Former US President Jimmy Carter boosted the initiative while on a visit to the island in 2002, providing enough of the kind of outside interference to render it null. It turned positively counterproductive from the capitalist viewpoint soon after when more than 8 million Cubans approved a constitutional reform declaring socialism the "irrevocable" governmental form. Island reaction Initial official Cuban reaction was silence, although many citizens, approached by the foreign media, expressed deep disappointment with the decision that prolongs their deprivations and reduces them to the status of enemies of a state that has determined they have neither the incentive nor the means to attack. Most had counted on the promise of a much-heralded "new beginning." Exactly why Cubans had hung so much hope on Obama is not clear. He never promised them a blockade lift, and they are just one of many groups, foreign and domestic, who have been dismayed at the US president's failure to deliver, as his campaign rhetoric read, "Change We Can Believe In." They might have missed the day, Sept. 13, 2008, when, for no apparent reason, Obama changed the message to, "Change We Need." Campaign strategist David Axelrod explained to reporters the slogan had not really changed that much. "It's not that we're moving away from it, but we're incorporating it." And perhaps the slogan did not change as much as did the definition of "we." After a couple of days, official Cuba responded, much in the vein of its citizens. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said the president was

"well-intentioned" but had missed a "historic opportunity." "Americans voted for him because he promised to make changes," Rodriguez said, echoing Obama's own progressive wing. "Where is the change in the blockade of Cuba?" he asked, answering, "There is no change." Foreign Minister Rodriguez was rather gentle in his criticism, noting that, compared to the former US administration, "there is less aggression," but he nonetheless pointed out that the blockade is the "primary obstacle to development" and has so far cost his nation US\$223 billion. He cautioned that the island would not be deterred, avowing, "The Cuban revolution is solid and unbeatable, with or without the blockade." They will carry on as in years past. On Oct. 28, Cuba will once again present to the UN General Assembly its annual resolution of condemnation, and once again, almost all member states will vote in support of the resolution. Last time, only three nations voted with the US Israel, Palau, and the Marshall Islands.

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