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‘Acoustic Attacks’ Crisis Generates Bewilderment, New Difficulties for Cubans

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Discontent and bewilderment has spread throughout Cuba, especially among citizens who had hoped to travel to the US, after the US reduced its consular service in Havana to a minimum and ordered 60% of its embassy personnel to return home, claiming that there had been “acoustic attacks” against its diplomats.

Relations between Cuba and the US have been in decline since Donald Trump’s arrival in the White House ([NotiCen, April 6, 2017](#), and [Aug. 10, 2017](#)). Even before his electoral triumph, Trump had threatened the government of President Raúl Castro and promised to revise the rapprochement policy initiated by US President Barack Obama (2009-2017), arguing that it had failed to achieve political change in Cuba.

Cubans have been waiting for months to see exactly what sort of crisis Trump’s words would trigger.

The alleged acoustic attacks came to light in September, when the US said that several of its representatives in Havana were suffering from the results of “sonic attacks” recorded between December 2016 and August. The accusations have been denied by Cuban authorities. Castro rejected the idea that his government had participated in that type of aggression and has offered the US many conveniences to facilitate its investigations in Cuban territory, according to press reports.

An alert published on the US Embassy in Havana website said that numerous employees had suffered “significant injuries as a consequence of these attacks,” and had exhibited a range of symptoms “including ear complaints and hearing loss, dizziness, headache, fatigue, cognitive issues, and difficulty sleeping.”

The US Department of State has not attributed the attacks to the Cuban government, but maintains that “the Government of Cuba is responsible for taking all appropriate steps to prevent attacks on our diplomatic personnel and on US citizens in Cuba.” Washington has not provided details on the incidents, but according to the press, 24 persons were affected.

In late October, the Cuban Ministry of the Interior dismissed the incidents as “science fiction.” In addition, it asserted that the US has refused to cooperate fully with the investigation undertaken by Cuba, which it said involved 2,000 security officials and experts.

Obstacles to obtaining visas

Accustomed to more than half a century of political ups and downs that have caused all manner of problems in their daily lives, many Cubans are perplexed by this peculiar incident and its many repercussions.

The reduction of US personnel at the embassy in Havana has led to the suspension of previously scheduled interviews with potential Cuban travelers to the US, and to anxious days for hundreds of

disappointed Cubans trying to find information and reclaim the money they had already paid for the consular process.

Cuba has one of the highest rates of denials for tourist visas to the US. Around 76% of requests are denied, according to US sources. In a country where the average salary is around US\$25 a month, potential travelers must show the consulate that they own property, and have jobs and emotional bonds that will force them to return home; they must clear any doubts that they might take advantage of a tourist visa to stay in the US and seek political asylum.

Many would-be travelers try for years, submitting their applications again and again, and appealing to their relatives in the US, who take responsibility for the cost of consular paperwork, airline ticket, and the travelers' expenses while in the US. Now, however, according to recent stipulations announced by Washington, Cubans will have to travel abroad, to a US embassy in another country, for their consular interview.

That means Cubans will have to obtain a third-country visa, which is not a simple matter. Over the years, Latin American countries have increased the requirements to grant visas to Cubans because some have used those visas to begin overland journeys to the US border ([NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015](#), and [Dec. 8, 2016](#)).

Washington has said that it will continue the family reunification program that has been in place for Cubans, allowing travel to the US for minors claimed by their parents, as well as for parents who have been claimed by children already living in the US. But these procedures, too, were usually handled through the US consulate in Havana.

Travel alerts

Following the "acoustic attack," the US State Department issued a travel alert warning US citizens to not travel to Cuba, and if they did, not to stay in hotels frequented by Americans in Havana. According to press reports, some of the incidents occurred in two emblematic hotels, the Hotel Nacional and the Capri, built in the first half of the 20th century and located near the US Embassy. The other attacks supposedly occurred in the residences of US diplomats.

On Sept. 29, the US Embassy website posted, "The Department of State warns US citizens not to travel to Cuba," and furthermore, states that the embassy building was "severely damaged" due to flooding caused by Hurricane Irma in September ([NotiCen, Oct. 5, 2017](#)).

Travel from the US

Washington has reaffirmed that there are still restrictions on travel to Cuba for any US citizen, and that any visit must fit within the 12 existing categories. Travel to Cuba skyrocketed in 2015 and 2016, during the Castro-Obama era, thanks in part to the approval of direct commercial flights from several US cities. Those flights are still in operation.

In addition, Cubans in the US who hold Cuban passports have been worried about the immigration procedures that must be conducted at the Cuban consulate in Washington, D.C., as the US has expelled 15 Cuban diplomats from the Cuban Embassy in the capital. Cubans who arrived in the US before January 1971 must keep their Cuban passport updated so they can visit their home country, even if they are naturalized US citizens and have a US passport. Cuban-Americans who left Cuba

before January 1971 can travel there with a US passport, but must apply for a visa from the Cuban Embassy in Washington.

The most recent turn in the relations between Cuba and the US is fueling the usual debate: On one side are hard-liners who never agreed with the Obama-Castro rapprochement plans, and the other are those who believe that tensions between the two countries end up hurting the people, as is now happening in relation to family reunification and tourism visas.

Goods, travelers, and money have been flowing from the US to Cuba since 2015 and have contributed to the flowering of the private sector and a more relaxed home economy at a crucial time—while Caracas, Cuba’s usual economic support, struggles with economic and political crises. Meanwhile, Russia, Cuba’s historical ally, is ambitiously seeking to regain its leading role in Latin America, although it lacks the solvency of the former Soviet Union.

Cubans have not been so unsettled on an issue that involves health and politics since 2006, when then-President Fidel Castro (prime minister 1959-1976; president 1976- 2008) had a medical emergency that put his life at risk and pushed him into retirement. At the time, Fidel Castro decreed that his health situation was a state secret and sparked myriad rumors and hypotheses. Now, in the streets of Havana, many Cubans hypothesize about who could have carried the “sonic aggression,” and how an operation of such magnitude could have gone unnoticed.

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