

3-11-1999

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### Recommended Citation

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## **Cuba Briefs: Five Telephone Firms Blocked, Baseball Series Arranged**

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 1999-03-11

### *Cuba cuts telephone service of five US companies*

Making good on its threat, Cuba cut most telephone connections to the US on Feb. 25 when five of the seven US companies that provide long-distance connections to Cuba refused to pay their bills to the Cuban telephone company Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba (ETECSA). The action failed to eliminate service to Cuba, however, since the US companies used satellites and third-party countries to connect with Cuba. Callers and telephone companies reported delays and some poor connections, but calls continued both to and from Cuba.

Cuba took the action because the five companies refused to pay ETECSA US\$19 million in charges that have accumulated since December. AT&T, MCI, LDDS Communications, IDB Communications Group, and WilTel are awaiting a decision by Miami Judge James Lawrence King on whether the money may be garnisheed in partial payment for a US\$187 million judgment against Cuba for the 1996 downing of Hermanos al Rescate airplanes (see NotiSur, 1996-03-15, NotiCen, 1998-11-05).

Two other firms, Sprint and Puerto Rico-based Telefonica Larga Distancia (TLD), were allowed to continue service to Cuba because they had no outstanding debt with ETECSA. AT&T has contacted ETECSA in an attempt to negotiate a way out of the situation. Although calls are going through, Sprint and TLD do not have the installed capacity to handle the normal volume of calls. The other five companies handled 70% of the traffic before the cutoff.

On March 3, US President Bill Clinton's administration announced it was intervening as a party in the suit brought by families of the pilots killed in the shutdown. National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer said the government would act in case an appeal to the upcoming ruling by Judge King is needed. The administration had already advised King that using the telephone funds is not in the interests of the US. "We feel that by intervening as a party we're in the best position in case of an appeal to support the president's action to restore telecom payments as soon as possible," Hammer said.

### *Cuba, US approve exhibition baseball games*

Despite Cuban attacks on President Clinton's January modifications of US Cuban policy, both countries have approved a two-game baseball exhibition series between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team. The first game is scheduled for March 28 in Havana and the second will be played in Baltimore on a date yet to be decided. Orioles owner Peter Angelos first proposed the series in 1996, but the State Department rejected it as contrary to US policy. But Clinton included baseball diplomacy as part of the cultural-exchange programs suggested in his January policy changes (see NotiCen, 1999-01-07).

Since January, Angelos and a delegation of players-union representatives and major-league officials have negotiated with Raul Villanueva, president of the Cuban Sports Institute, regarding such matters as padding on the outfield fences and wooden vs. aluminum bats. The chief stumbling block, however, was disagreement between the two governments on what to do with profits from the games. The US position was that no proceeds could go to the Cuban government. Instead, the US insisted that proceeds be turned over to private charitable organizations such as Catholic Relief Services in the US and Caritas in Cuba. The Cuban government initially insisted that the proceeds pay for medicines to help victims of Hurricane Mitch in Central America, where Cuban medical teams are attending them. "Cuba will not renounce this just and noble requirement even if none of the games is played," said an official Cuban statement on the talks.

At the same time, however, the Cuban side criticized US insistence on dictating where the proceeds would go. During the negotiations, Angelos sparred with the Clinton administration regarding its position. Angelos' view was that the Orioles share of the profits belongs to the Orioles. He also said the Cuban negotiators had never insisted that any proceeds should go to the Cuban government or any governmental agencies. In the final agreement, the proceeds will support baseball programs in both countries or go to future sports exchanges.

Expressing approval of the agreement, State Department spokesman James Rubin said the proceeds, if any, would be "minimal." Meanwhile, anti-Castro leaders in Miami have mounted a protest against the games. Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) spokeswoman Ninaska Perez said the games would signal US approval of repression in Cuba.

Pedro Solares of Agenda Cuba said, "If this exhibition game takes place, it will forever taint American baseball history." Some exile groups said they would picket the Orioles at their spring-training camp in Ft. Lauderdale, and some major-league players who defected from Cuba have also protested the games. Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) said he will work to get the games canceled. (Sources: NSNBC, 01/21/99, Reuters, 02/25/99, 02/26/99; Reuters, 03/03/99; Associated Press, 01/19/99, 01/20/99, 02/25/99, 02/29/99, 03/04/99; The New York Times, 03/06/99; Notimex, 03/03/99, 03/08/99)

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