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LADB Staff

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## **U.S. Congressional Panel Approves Restrictive Plan to Ease Cuba Embargo**

*by LADB Staff*

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In early October, a US congressional conference committee agreed on the final version of an agricultural-appropriations bill that contains language easing the embargo on trade with Cuba. But there is little chance Cuba will buy anything in the US as a result of the changes.

At the same time, the bill stiffens the ban on travel to Cuba. In July, the House approved two Republican-sponsored amendments to its version of the spending bill that would have essentially eliminated the ban on sales of food and medicine and on travel by US residents to Cuba. But in negotiations with pro-embargo forces, the House leadership under Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-TX) removed the amendments after the full House had passed the bill (see NotiCen, 2000-08-04).

On Oct. 5, House and Senate negotiators in committee approved a final version of the bill, which is expected to pass both houses. The bill includes provisions for the sale of food and medicine to Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Sudan countries currently under US trade sanctions. But in the case of Cuba, the bill prohibits granting either US government or private bank credits to Cuba, which effectively eliminates Cuba's ability to buy food and medicine in the US except with third-country financing.

The bill does not remove the prohibition on ships that have called on Cuba ports from docking in US ports for six months, nor does it permit the sale of Cuban goods in the US. Under present circumstances, with Cuba strapped for hard currency, the bill does little to change the embargo while it hardens the travel aspects of US policy.

Because it embeds in law the executive-branch restrictions on travel to Cuba, the bill threatens to block any increase in business contacts in Cuba and US tourism to the island. Travel restrictions have been eased recently as part of President Bill Clinton's people-to-people initiative (see NotiCen, 1999-01-07).

But the bill would freeze into law those categories of travelers, such as journalists and academics, permitted to go to Cuba while prohibiting further relaxation of the travel ban. In what appears to be a sop to the farm interests that have led the battle to lift the trade ban, the bill adds farm-sales representative to the list of categories.

Some commentary on the bill portrayed it as a historic breakthrough, even a thaw in Cuba-US relations. A Reuters story said Congress was nearing a "landmark shift" in Cuban relations. Craig Fuller of the Americans for Humanitarian Trade with Cuba said the "historic vote marks the first time Congress has moved to ease the embargo on Cuba." But curiously, those in Congress pressing for the "landmark shift" were disappointed in the bill, and no Democrat on the conference

committee voted for it. Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), a longtime opponent of the embargo, called the bill "a real setback."

### *Pro-embargo leaders say bill is a victory*

By contrast, staunchly pro-embargo Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) said the bill was "a very important victory." And Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) said the bill was "smoke and mirrors." The reaction of the anti-Castro forces in Congress made it clear that the bill they helped engineer was a setback to the anti-embargo farm bloc and the majority in both houses who wanted the embargo partly or wholly lifted.

In Miami, the anti-Castro Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) said the farm interests and President Fidel Castro had failed to get what they wanted out of the bill. CANF executive vice president Dennis Hays said the public should thank DeLay for putting principles before "corrupted profits." Hays said Castro would no longer be able to claim that "we are responsible for the suffering of the Cuban people." He added, "The Cuban people will now understand that the US is prepared to send food and that it will be Castro who decides if he is going to feed the people."

### *Cuba says it will not buy in the US*

Hours after congressional negotiators agreed on the bill, word came from Havana that Cuba would not buy anything from the US. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said on Oct. 6 that, in case the bill passed, Cuba would, "of course, not collaborate." He said it was "absolutely impossible" that Cuba would go along with the congressional "maneuver." The bill is an example of how anti-Castro elements are still able to prevent movement toward "a rational policy," said Perez.

Congressional observers predicted Clinton would sign the bill, but in remarks at the White House Oct. 6, Clinton signalled his disappointment with it mainly because it codified the travel ban. "It definitely restricts the ability of the executive branch to increase people-to-people contacts between Americans and Cubans, thus further punishing and restricting the possibilities of the Cuban people," said Clinton. "I think a lot of people voted for it, because they probably couldn't think of a way to say they voted against food and medicine, knowing it wasn't real, so they got a lot of votes for a travel restriction that I can't believe a majority of the Congress really believes in," Clinton said. "And I think it was a big mistake." [Sources: The New York Times, 09/20/00; Reuters, 10/3/00; Spanish News Service EFE, CNN, The Washington Times, Inter Press Service, Associated Press, 10/06/00; The Miami Herald, 10/06/00, 10/07/00; The Washington Post, 10/06/00, 10/08/00]

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