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LADB Staff

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Cuba Skeptical of New U.S. Law that Alters Embargo on Food, Medicines

by LADB Staff

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In late October, President Bill Clinton signed a US\$78 billion agriculture appropriations bill that included changes in the US embargo on trade with Cuba. Almost simultaneously, the Clinton administration moved to improve relations with North Korea, and the UN General Assembly again passed a resolution urging the US to end its Cuban embargo.

The House approved its version of the appropriations bill on Oct. 11, and the Senate approved a similar version Oct. 18. The Senate had earlier passed a version that lifted the sanctions on sales of food and medicine outright, but the final version included restrictions identical to those in the House version (see NotiCen, 2000-08-04).

The bill lifts sanctions that have prohibited the sale of food and medicine to Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Libya, and North Korea. It also prohibits the president from imposing such sanctions in the future without the consent of Congress. However, Cuba is the only country on the list that will be barred from receiving US government or private export credits to finance imports from the US. In addition, the bill codifies executive-branch restrictions on travel by US citizens to Cuba and turns the restrictions into law.

Expecting a backlash after the presidential election year is over, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT) said, "Wait till these farmers who think that they were given a great new market to deal in, wait till they try to get a visa to go there or try to get financing, they're going to be furious." Some US media described the bill as a partial lifting of the embargo or a thaw in frozen Cuba-US relations.

Also interpreting the bill as a relaxation of the embargo, presidential candidate Texas Gov. George W. Bush condemned the Senate vote. His Democratic rival, Vice President Al Gore, had no comment on the bill. Gore had assiduously courted the Cuban-exile vote in South Florida, calling himself a hard-liner on Cuba, but he avoided offending Democrats who favor easing or lifting the embargo.

However, neither President Fidel Castro nor anti-Castro exile leaders saw the bill as anything but a further tightening of the US Cuban policy. Anti-Castro Republicans in Congress called it a victory, and the Cuban government said it would buy nothing from the US. Castro led a mass protest in Havana as the bill was being completed. He said the restrictions were "humiliating."

Because of the credit restrictions, the American Farm Bureau Federation estimated that future sales to Cuba would amount to only US\$50 million out of Cuba's annual US\$750 million in food imports. But both embargo opponents and the hard-line embargo supporters in Congress agreed that the restrictions would make it nearly impossible to sell anything to Cuba.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said he was optimistic that the end of the embargo had drawn closer despite the setback with the agriculture bill. But he vigorously reiterated Havana's determination not to buy anything from the US. The first reason was "a question of national self-esteem," he said. "I'm sure the United States would never accept trade with another country under these conditions. Second, it's simply not possible to buy food in the United States under these conditions."

At the same time, Perez insisted Cuba had the cash to buy. He said Cuba expected to buy US\$1 billion in food and medicine next year from other countries, "and we have money to pay." Whether Cuba is able to buy or not, US farmers have hit a wall in trying to arrange sales.

A delegation representing US farmers went to Cuba in November and reported that the government there refused to make purchase agreements even through third-country financing. Clinton signed the appropriations bill Oct. 28 despite his opposition to the prohibitions on financing and to the loss of presidential control over travel restrictions, which undercuts his policy of promoting people-to-people contacts with Cuba. "Nonetheless, I decided that on balance this bill advances the interests of the American people," he said.

State Department worried about travel restrictions

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said losing executive control of travel to Cuba could hamper the conduct of foreign policy. In an official response to the legislation, the State Department said the bill would make it difficult to assist US citizens in Cuba who might be "in need" because "there is no allowance made for licenses for air-ambulance companies. So even if a gravely ill American citizen in Cuba were in need of medevac, we would be unable to issue a license for that purpose." The same would apply to attorneys who need to visit Cuba to take depositions or contractors who need to repair equipment at the US Interests Section in Havana.

Albright visits North Korea to offer economic assistance

While the agriculture bill was on its way to the president's desk, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright traveled to North Korea for a historic visit. The visit was part of the Clinton administration's efforts to normalize relations with what is regarded as the most intractable of all remaining communist nations. The apparent purpose behind the recent drive to improve relations with North Korea is the threat its nuclear missiles pose to world peace. Albright hoped to get an agreement by which North Korea would reduce its nuclear threat in exchange for economic assistance from the US.

While the State Department says that restoration of normal relations with Cuba rests on Castro's willingness to hold elections and improve Cuba's human rights record, Albright took no such message to Pyongyang. The contradiction in policy prompted some commentators to suggest that if Cuba wants trade and economic assistance from the US, it must embark on a missile-building program.

UN votes to condemn embargo

Days after Clinton signed the agriculture bill, the UN General Assembly voted for the ninth time to ask the US to lift the embargo. The resolution, drafted by Cuba, passed with a record vote of 167 in

favor, three opposed, and four abstaining. Only the US, Israel, and the Marshall Islands opposed. El Salvador, Nicaragua, Morocco, and Latvia abstained. The resolution also criticized the attempt through the 1996 Helms-Burton Act to impose the US embargo policy on third countries. [Sources: CNN, The Miami Herald, 10/06/00; The New York Times, 10/07/00; Agence France-Presse, 10/18/00; Reuters, 10/03/00, 10/05/00, 10/28/00, 10/29/00; Associated Press, 10/06/00, 10/19/00, 10/24/00, 11/09/00; Washington Post, 11/10/00, 11/11/00]

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