

LATIN AMERICA

U.S. Imposes New Travel Curbs on Cuba

Cruise tourism targeted in bid to pressure Havana to cease support for Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela



A Royal Caribbean cruise ship sailed into Havana harbor May 6. PHOTO: YAMIL LAGE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By José de Córdoba and Ian Talley

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American cruise ships will be barred from going to Cuba under strict travel restrictions rolled out Tuesday by the Trump administration, as it ratchets up pressure on Havana to abandon its support of Venezuela's beleaguered government.

The U.S. banned cruise lines, yachts, sailboats and private flights from going to the island, while preserving commercial airline travel. The new regulation eliminates a category of travel used by most Americans not of Cuban descent to visit the island.

The new regulations are designed to dry up revenue from visitors to the island, one of Cuba's few sources of foreign exchange, in a bid to spark political change in the hemisphere's lone communist country.

The move is likely to have a major economic impact in Cuba, whose economy is already reeling from decreased economic aid from Havana's main ally, Venezuela, and previous moves by the Trump administration to squeeze the island's vital tourism industry.

Whether the move will have any political effect is unclear. Cuba’s regime has managed to survive harsh U.S. economic and political pressure in the decades since Fidel Castro seized power in the 1959 revolution.

In recent weeks, the island has been hit by widespread shortages of key foods such as chicken and flour, leading the government to increase rationing and causing hourslong lines to obtain the rationed goods.

“This is a big blow for the economy, which was hoping for growth in tourism, the only part of the economy which could help Cuba make up for the loss of the Venezuela shock,” said Pavel Vidal, a Cuban economist at the Javeriana University in Cali, Colombia. “It’s very probable that Cuba will go into recession.”

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez condemned the move. “I strongly reject new sanctions announced by #US vs. #Cuba which further restrict #US citizens’ travels to Cuba, aimed at suffocating the economy & harming the living standards of Cubans in order to forcefully obtain political concessions,” said Mr. Rodríguez in a tweet. “Once again they will fail.”

The actions—which will come into force on Wednesday—will cut off the income derived from cruises docking in Cuba, largely run by Carnival Corp., Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd. and Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., industry experts said. Carnival didn’t respond to a request for comment.

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A Norwegian representative said the company was “closely monitoring these recent developments and any resulting impact to cruise travel to Cuba.” A Royal Caribbean spokeswoman said

the company was “analyzing the details to understand the impact on our itineraries” and canceling trips to Cuba this week.

The regulatory changes are the latest attempt by Washington to squeeze the Cuban regime and punish it for its support of Venezuela’s autocratic President Nicolás Maduro. The White House says that Cuba’s intelligence services help keep Mr. Maduro in power by thwarting the efforts of Venezuela’s U.S.-backed opposition to replace him with a leader the U.S. and more than 50 other nations say is the country’s legitimate president.

“Cuba continues to play a destabilizing role in the Western Hemisphere, providing a communist foothold in the region and propping up U.S. adversaries in places like Venezuela and Nicaragua by fomenting instability, undermining the rule of law, and suppressing democratic processes,”

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement accompanying the action. “These actions will help to keep U.S. dollars out of the hands of Cuban military, intelligence, and security services.”

But the U.S. also wants to overthrow the government in Havana, which it sees as supporting leftist regimes in Latin America. In a November speech, national security adviser John Bolton said Cuba was a “brutal dictatorship.” The U.S., Mr. Bolton said, stood “firmly with the Cuban people, and we share their aspirations for real democratic change.”

Mr. Trump’s Cuba sanctions are likely to be popular with older and more conservative Cuban-American voters in Florida, who are a key constituency in a state vital to Mr. Trump’s hopes to win re-election in 2020, analysts say. The state is also home to a growing community of Venezuelans who have emigrated to the U.S. in recent years fleeing economic collapse and political chaos.

The moves end “people to people travel,” a broad category that allowed American tourists to visit the island for educational or cultural reasons.

Analysts say the U.S.’s latest action will be devastating to a growing private sector of Cuban entrepreneurs who operate thousands of bed-and-breakfasts in private homes, drive private taxis and run private restaurants in Havana and throughout the island.

“This is the coup de grâce of American tourist travel to Cuba,” said Ted Henken, a professor at Baruch College in New York who studies Cuba’s growing number of private entrepreneurs. Mr. Henken believes as many as half of the 600,000 people who hold licenses to work as private entrepreneurs are involved in the tourism industry.

Since 2017, the Trump administration has reversed Obama-era policy that sought to end decades of Cold War enmity with Havana in the hope that economic engagement would lead to a freer economy and eventual democratization.

As part of the Trump rollback, the U.S. has cut back on the amount of remittances Cuban-Americans can send their relatives on the island, and allowed U.S. citizens to sue companies in U.S. courts that are profiting from properties confiscated by the Castro regime.

The administration has tried to stop heavily subsidized oil exports Venezuela sends to Cuba in exchange for Cuban support. That support includes the presence of about 20,000 doctors and as many as 2,300 Cuban intelligence agents the U.S. say are key in keeping Mr. Maduro in control.

The U.S. doesn’t permit regular tourism in Cuba, but allows certain categories of travel, such as journalism, structured academic exchanges and for Cuban Americans to see family members.

About half the Americans who go to Cuba each year are Cuban-Americans who visit family, said Collin Laverty, president of Cuba Educational Travel, one of the largest organizers of U.S. travel to the island. But about 80% to 90% of the remainder used the now-eliminated people-to-people category, he said.

Cuba's Ministry of Tourism reported that around 800,000 passengers visited the country via cruise lines last year. It also reported that 586,000 Cuban- Americans came to the island.

John S. Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, said the policy will also affect other burgeoning tourist operations such as fishing tournaments and sailing regattas.

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