

# U.S. orders 15 Cuban diplomats to leave; Cuba blames Washington for deteriorating relations

BY NORA GÁMEZ TORRES  
*ngameztorres@elnuevoherald.com*

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The United States has given Cuba seven days for 15 employees at its embassy in Washington to leave the country, a State Department official told reporters on Tuesday.

Cuba protested the action and blamed the Trump administration for a deterioration in bilateral relations.

U.S. authorities also confirmed that a 22nd American diplomat is suffering from symptoms tied to a mysterious sonic attack in Havana. The U.S. has been unable to determine who or what is behind the attacks.

The U.S. decision to boot two-thirds of Cuban staff at the embassy was communicated to Cuba Ambassador José Ramón Cabañas on Tuesday morning, the official said. The U.S. gave Cuba a list of the personnel it wants out of the country, although they were not declared “persona non grata.”

“The decision was made due to Cuba’s failure to take appropriate steps to protect our diplomats in accordance with its obligations under the Vienna Convention,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a statement. “This order will ensure equity in our respective diplomatic operations.”

Cuba responded to the measure with indignation.

“MINREX (Foreign Ministry) strongly protests and denounces this unfounded and unacceptable ... eminently political decision,” Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said at a press conference Tuesday afternoon.

The United States has responded “in a hasty, inappropriate and unthinking manner and without evidence on the alleged facts in which Cuba has no

responsibility,” he added.

The foreign minister raised doubts about the attacks and said that the Cuban investigation team concluded that “there is no evidence of the occurrence of the alleged incidents or the causes or origin of the health conditions reported by U.S. diplomats and their families.”

Rodríguez said U.S. agencies investigating the alleged attacks traveled to Cuba for the first time in 50 years in June, August and September of this year, and met with their Cuban counterparts. But the United States did not send the necessary evidence to clarify the facts or offer access to those affected, despite the insistence of the Cuban government, he said. He also added that Cuban investigators have not identified “perpetrators, or persons with motivation or means, nor has the presence of suspicious persons” been established in the country.

Rodríguez mentioned that the Cuban government is not “familiarized” with equipment that could have caused the attacks and immediately reinforced the security to U.S. diplomats.

Later, Rodríguez unleashed strong criticism of the State Department and the statements made by the U.S. official who spoke to reporters on Tuesday, calling them “science fiction” and “empty rhetoric.”

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Only one consular officer will remain at the Cuban embassy in Washington. The expulsion of Cuban personnel will mean that travel will remain in limbo for the hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans flying to the island every year to visit relatives.

The U.S. also suspended the processing of all visas in Havana, which has created uncertainty among Cuban families divided by the Florida Straits.

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“We are evaluating the impact of the reduction of personnel on these services but the secretary’s focus is on the safety and well-being of the diplomatic personnel,” the official said.

The move comes after the United States last week announced it would be reducing non-essential American personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Havana by 60 percent as a measure of protection from the sonic attacks that have affected at least 22 diplomats and family members. Among the first affected were members of intelligence agencies working under diplomatic cover, the Associated Press reported. All nonessential personnel is expected to be back in the U.S. by the end of this week.

The State Department has not disclosed the size of its mission in Cuba. But James Cason, who served as chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana between 2002 and 2005, said that about 50 diplomats are stationed there. The Cuban mission in Washington had about 20 fewer employees during those years and is likely about the same today, he added.

For the U.S. to consider restoring the operations at its embassy in Havana, “we will need full assurances from the Cuban government that these attacks would not continue,” the State Department official said. He added that expelling the 15 Cuban diplomats “does not signal a change of policy or a determination of responsibility” but ensures “equity on the impact of our respective operations.”

Meanwhile, diplomatic relations will be maintained and Cuba has said it will continue investigating, the official told reporters.

Florida Republican senator Marco Rubio, who previously called for the closing of the embassy in Havana, “commended” the State Department for expelling the Cuban diplomats.

“No one should be fooled by the Castro regime’s claim it knows nothing about how these harmful attacks are occurring or who perpetrated them,” Rubio said in a statement. “I have called on the State Department to conduct an independent investigation and submit a comprehensive report to Congress, and I look forward to reviewing it.

“At this time, the U.S. embassy in Havana should be downgraded to an interests section and we should be prepared to consider additional measures against the Castro regime if these attacks continue,” he added.

Engage Cuba, a coalition of several companies and organizations lobbying to end the U.S. embargo, criticized the expulsion of personnel from the Cuba Embassy. .

“Expelling Cuban diplomats will not solve this mystery; it will not improve the safety of U.S. personnel, but it will make it harder for hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans to visit their families on the island,” James Williams, the organization’s president, said in a statement.

 **Carlos Curbelo**  
@carloscurbelo Seguir

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And Tampa Rep. Kathy Castor (D-FL) called the suspension of visas irresponsible.

“Irresponsible for U.S. not to have plan for family travel, visas, ” she wrote on Twitter.

The Cuban government has so far denied any responsibility for the attacks. The Cuban embassy has not immediately responded to a request for comment but the reduction of staff will affect the consular services in Washington.

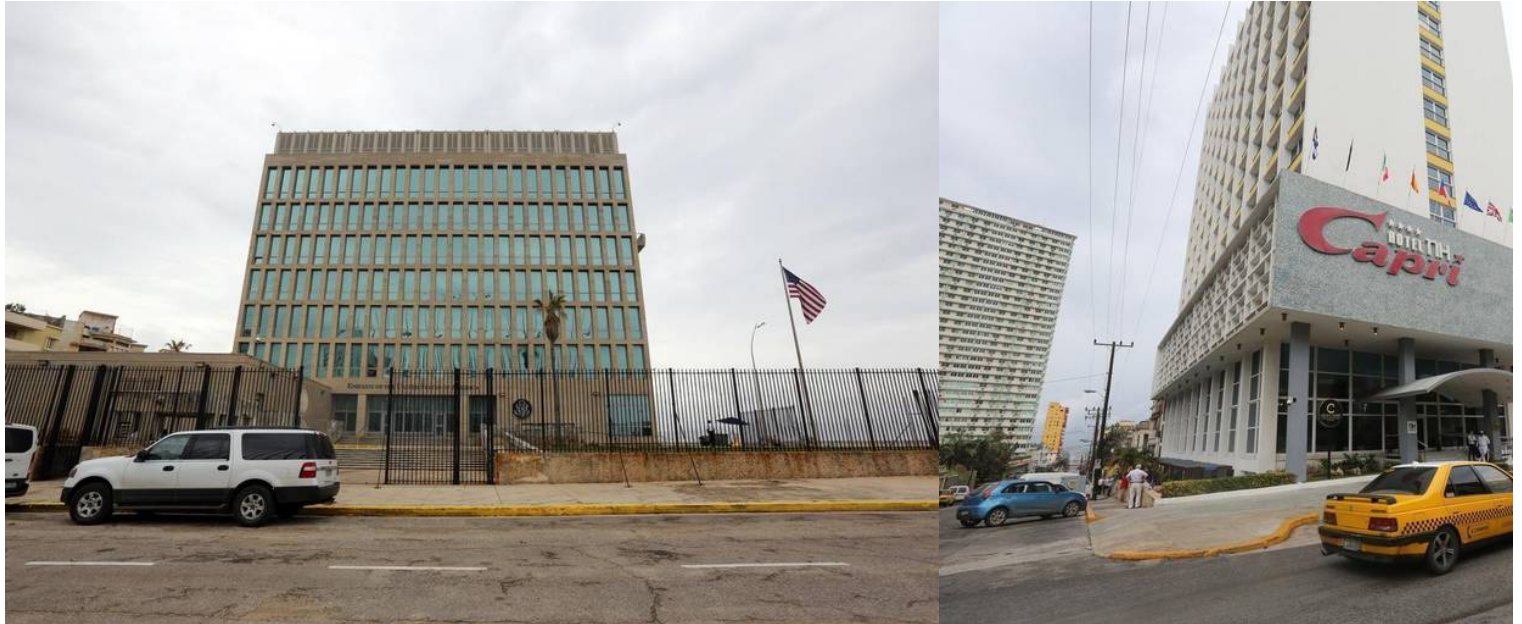
Cuba requires entrance visas to its citizens as well as the use of a Cuban passport to travel to the island, regardless of whether the individual born in Cuba is a U.S. citizen or from other countries. The renewal of passport or its authorization is an expensive process and an important source of income for the Cuban government. A new passport or renewal costs \$350 plus postage. Extension and entry clearance with a U.S. passport (only for those who left Cuba before 1970) costs \$160. And waiting times for these procedures can last for months.

In the past, Cuban diplomats have complained that the United States has not allowed more people to be hired to meet the demand of hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans who travel to Cuba every year.

“The Cuban embassy in Washington does not operate in a normal way, even after the reestablishment of relations,” in 2015, said Yuleika Pérez, manager of Tocaroro Travel, a travel agency based in Miami, that also offers assistance in consular matters. “Before the resumption of diplomatic relations, the delay [to obtain passports and visas] was around a year. Something similar will probably happen again for consular services,” she said.

*Miami Herald reporter Patricia Mazzei and el Nuevo Herald correspondent Mario J. Pentón contributed to this story.*

*Follow Nora Gámez Torres on Twitter: @ngameztorres*



The U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba, Friday afternoon, Sept. 29, 2017. On Friday morning the State Department announced that it was withdrawing all but essential diplomats from the embassy. **Emily Michot** - [emichot@miamiherald.com](mailto:emichot@miamiherald.com)