

Trump administration expels two-thirds of Cuban embassy staff from US

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On Tuesday, October 3, the US State Department informed the Cuban ambassador, José Ramón Cabañas, that the Cuban government would need to remove 15 diplomatic personnel from its embassy in Washington, DC. The reduction, which amounts to two-thirds of embassy staff, in the wake of mysterious allegations of “sonic attacks” affecting staff stationed at the US embassy in Havana, effectively fulfills President Donald Trump’s campaign promise to “cancel Obama’s one-sided Cuban deal.”

The Cuban government was presented with a list of individuals the US government wants removed. After the reduction, the Cuban embassy will be left with around a dozen staffers, with only one of them a consular official. According to an Associated Press (AP) report, this leaves the embassy with a smaller staff than it maintained before the rapprochement and the upgrading of its “interests section” to an embassy.

All of the Cuban embassy’s business officers were ordered to leave, putting an end to new discussions on trade deals between American companies and the Cuban government. One departing Cuban embassy staffer noted in a message, “Due to this decision, the activities developed by the Economic and Trade Office of the Embassy of Cuba to the United States ... will be seriously affected.”

With the departure of embassy staff, the processing of visas for Cubans and Cuban-Americans residing in the United States and intending to travel to the island will grind to a halt, potentially cutting off travel indefinitely. At the end of September, when the US removed its own personnel from the US embassy in Havana, the government announced it would be suspending processing of immigration visas for Cubans wishing to emigrate to the US. This would appear to violate an agreement dating from the mid-90s, under

which up to 20,000 visas are granted to Cubans each year, providing a safety valve for social anger against the Cuban government.

The order for Cuban diplomats to leave follows widely reported allegations about “sonic” or “acoustic” weapon attacks against US diplomatic personnel stationed in Havana, which have supposedly affected up to 22 individuals from the US and five Canadians over the last 11 months. Those affected have reportedly suffered a variety of symptoms, including nausea, headaches, dizziness and other seemingly neurological and cognitive issues.

All of the reports concerning the attacks rely upon unnamed State Department sources, with none of those affected named. Nor have those treating them been named. This is perhaps no surprise, as AP reported that the majority of the “diplomatic” personnel affected were actually US intelligence agents.

Speculation about the cause of the attacks, and whether they happened at all, has reached into the realm of science fiction, and many scientists have come out stating that none of the proposed causal mechanisms, such as ultra- or infrasound, would account for all the varying symptoms reported. In a report appearing in *Wired*, Robert Putnam, senior marketing manager at LRAD, a firm which manufactures actual acoustic weapons, said, “Nothing about this story makes any sense to us.”

Cuba has vehemently denied any involvement with the attacks, and even took the unprecedented step of allowing FBI investigators to travel openly to the country and find the source of the attacks. The US government consequently has not accused the Cuban government of being the source of the attacks. Although five Canadians were also supposedly affected, the Canadian government has declined to

comment, and is not pulling any of its staff from the island.

Officially, according to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, “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.”

The Cuban government, although cooperative with the initial investigation, has protested the latest US moves to expel the members of its diplomatic mission. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez issued a statement saying, “MINREX (Foreign Ministry) strongly protests and denounces this unfounded and unacceptable ... eminently political decision,” and protesting the lack of access to the victims or any other evidence sharing, notes that “there is no evidence of the occurrence of the alleged incidents or the causes or origin of the health conditions reported by US diplomats and their families.”

Whether the attacks actually happened or not, the Trump administration appears determined to use them as a pretext for undoing much of the rapprochement begun under the Obama administration, in order to curry favor with the right-wing Cuban-American exiles. After having already cut back on travel relaxation and banning financial deals with the Cuban government and military in June, the latest moves essentially put a freeze on any further talks between US companies and the Cuban government.

At the same time, by not simply cutting off relations entirely, the Trump administration has largely preserved the current arrangements and deals that have already been made, such as with the airlines, cruise ship companies and Airbnb.

For its part, the desperation of the Cuban government to expand its relationship with the US in order to lessen its reliance on a shaky Venezuela is evident in its willingness to invite the intelligence agents of American imperialism into the country.



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