

# O Estado de S. Paulo

Sao Paulo, Brazil

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## Comércio entre Cuba e EUA cai 49% em 3 anos

Empresários americanos dos setores alimentício e agrícola mantêm negócios com Havana desde 2001, graças a relaxamento no embargo econômico

### GUILHERME RUSSO - O Estado de S.Paulo

Nos últimos três anos, a venda de produtos alimentares e agrícolas dos Estados Unidos a Cuba diminuiu 49,23%, depois de sucessivos períodos de elevação. Além de alimentos e commodities agrícolas, os americanos podem vender apenas produtos médicos a Havana, por causa do embargo econômico aplicado contra o governo cubano desde 1962.

Entre 2001 e o fim de 2011, exportadores de produtos alimentares e agrícolas americanos terão vendido ao governo de Havana o equivalente a mais de US\$ 3,8 bilhões, segundo projeção sobre dados do Conselho Comercial e Econômico EUA-Cuba, de Nova York. Isso representa quase todo o comércio entre os países, já que a venda de insumos hospitalares dos EUA à ilha é inexpressiva.

Até 2008, quando americanos dos setores alimentício e agrícola venderam mais de US\$ 710 milhões a Cuba, essa relação comercial entre os países registrava aumentos desde que havia sido posta em prática. Quando 2011 acabar, porém, US\$ 360,4 milhões terão sido exportados, conforme uma projeção realizada pelo Estado com base nas informações registradas pelo conselho.

A queda em relação a 2010 será de 10,38%, de acordo com o cálculo. No período anterior, a diminuição havia sido de 30,65% - a maior já registrada - e, entre 2008 e 2009, o comércio alimentar e agrícola entre Cuba e EUA encolheu 25,57%.

Razões. O consultor sênior para política do conselho, John Kavulich, diz que essa queda significa que Havana está importando menos. Estima-se que a ilha compre de outros países cerca de 80% dos alimentos que sua população consome. Desde que assumiu, o presidente Raúl Castro tem tentado aumentar a produção agrícola cubana - de acordo com economistas dissidentes, sem sucesso.

Segundo Kavulich, a produção interna tem conseguido substituir as importações, em certa medida. O americano lamenta que os dados econômicos oficiais do governo cubano não sejam confiáveis, explicando que sua entidade busca diversas fontes para a elaboração do levantamento.

Outro motivo para a queda nas relações comerciais entre Cuba e EUA, segundo Kavulich, é uma preferência do regime comunista em buscar negócios estabelecidos diretamente entre governos - "para garantir a confidencialidade dos contratos e de possíveis calotes". "Por isso os cubanos compram arroz do Vietnã e buscam negócios com empresas operadas pelo governo chinês." O alinhamento político também levaria Cuba a escolher outros parceiros - como a Venezuela - em detrimento dos EUA.

### GUILHERME RUSSO - O Estado de S.Paulo

Em 2008, ano em que Raúl Castro assumiu a presidência de Cuba, a venda de produtos alimentícios e agrícolas americanos ao regime comunista registrou uma elevação de 62,28%, movimentando mais de US\$ 710 milhões - um recorde desde o relaxamento no embargo econômico dos EUA contra o governo de Havana -, segundo os dados do Conselho Comercial e Econômico EUA-Cuba.

De acordo com o consultor sênior para política da entidade, John Kavulich, essa elevação em relação a 2007 - quando os cubanos compraram US\$ 437,5 milhões - deveu-se a uma tentativa de aproximação de Raúl ao governo americano.

A intenção do regime de Cuba em fomentar as compras dos produtos dos EUA, desde 2001, era de aproximar-se dos congressistas americanos, para que o embargo econômico fosse relaxado ainda mais, segundo explica o especialista.

Para Kavulich, a queda ocorrida entre 2009 e 2011, porém, mostrou que Raúl "desistiu de tentar mudar a mentalidade" dos legisladores dos EUA, pois seria mais "lucrativo", tanto no âmbito econômico como no político, "intensificar os negócios com Venezuela, Irã e China".

De acordo com o analista, além do sigilo nas negociações, esses países e suas empresas estatais oferecem a Cuba condições de pagamento - ou não pagamento - muito melhores do que qualquer outro mercado no mundo.

Demais parceiros. Brasil, Argentina, México, Canadá, Rússia e França também figuram entre os países e que substituem as importações de produtos americanos para o governo de Havana, segundo o mais recente relatório do Conselho Comercial e Econômico EUA-Cuba.

Kavulich explica, porém, que a iniciativa de fazer negócios com Cuba não parte do regime, mas desses outros países. Para o especialista, esses outros parceiros buscam manter relações comerciais com Havana para que as dívidas já adquiridas por Cuba em transações anteriores não caiam no esquecimento. / G.R.

# The Associated Press

New York, New York

21 October 2011

## **Cuba: compra de alimentos a EEUU cae 11% en primeros ocho meses**

Por ANDREA RODRIGUEZ  
The Associated Press

LA HABANA -- Las compras cubanas de alimentos a Estados Unidos disminuyeron un 11% en los primeros ocho meses de 2011 en relación con igual período de 2010, aseguró un analista de negocios norteamericano.

Según los reportes de John Kavulich, presidente del Consejo Económico y Comercial Estados Unidos-Cuba con sede en Nueva York a los cuales AP tuvo acceso, la isla adquirió entre enero y agosto de este año a productores del vecino país poco más de 240 millones de dólares contra los 268 millones de igual lapso de 2010.

"Representa un decrecimiento de aproximadamente el 11%", indicó el informe del asesor de negocios. Kavulich indicó que había considerado el comercio de los productos sin calcular los pagos de transporte, bancarios y otros relacionados con las exportaciones a Cuba.

Hasta la fecha, Cuba no ofreció las cifras de su sector externo para 2010, pero por lo general éstas difieren de las entregadas por fuertes norteamericanas pues la nación caribeña sí incluye esos gastos alegando que aunque Washington permitió las compras de alimentos, pone trabas que elevan los costos precisamente en los rubros de transporte y financieros.

Según Kavulich la caída de este año obedece a una serie de factores como las condiciones generosas del comercio ofrecido a la isla por los gobiernos aliados de China y Venezuela, así como un resurgimiento de relaciones comerciales con Brasil, Argentina, Vietnam, México y Canadá, entre otros.

Otros elementos a tener en cuenta es la falta de divisas que aqueja a Cuba y una baja en la eficiencia del cabildeo de las empresas estadounidenses a favor de normalizar el comercio con la isla que genera desestímulo.

"La reducción de las exportaciones de los Estados Unidos a Cuba no es el resultado de cambios en las regulaciones de pago implementado por la Oficina de Control de Activos Extranjeros (OFAC) del Departamento de Tesoro en Washington", indicó el informe de Kavulich.

Estados Unidos mantiene sanciones contra la isla desde comienzos de los años de los 60 con el objetivo de presionar su economía y lograr cambios en su sistema de gobierno.

Sin embargo, una enmienda del Congreso de Estados Unidos eliminó del embargo a los alimentos, abriendo la posibilidad de que los productores de esa nación vendieran a la isla, un comercio que se concretó en 2001.

Las autoridades cubanas protestaron pues el comercio no es bilateral, ya que los productos isleños no pueden entrar al mercado estadounidense.

La Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas de Cuba informó en 2010 -las últimas cifras disponibles- que debido a las ventas de alimentos Estados Unidos es el quinto socio comercial de la isla con ventas en 2009 por 729 millones de dólares, con una caída del 30% en relación con el año precedente.

# The New York Times

New York, New York

25 May 2011

## Revolutionary Cuba Now Lays Sand Traps for the Bourgeoisie

By Randal C. Archibold

MEXICO CITY — One of Fidel Castro's first acts upon taking power was to get rid of Cuba's golf courses, seeking to stamp out a sport he and other socialist revolutionaries saw as the epitome of bourgeois excess.



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Tourists on the government-owned golf course in the Cuban resort area of Varadero Beach. It is now Cuba's only 18-hole course.



Rolls Press/Popperfoto, via Getty Images

Fidel Castro playing in his customary military fatigues in the early 1960s, in what some say was an effort to mock the sport.

Now, 50 years later, foreign developers say the Cuban government has swung in nearly the opposite direction, giving preliminary approval in recent weeks for four large luxury golf resorts on the island, the first in an expected wave of more than a dozen that the government anticipates will lure free-spending tourists to a nation hungry for cash.

The four initial projects total more than \$1.5 billion, with the government's cut of the profits about half. Plans for the developments include residences that foreigners will be permitted to buy — a rare opportunity from a government that all but banned private property in its push for social equality.

Mr. Castro and his comrade in arms Che Guevara, who worked as a caddie in his youth in Argentina, were photographed in fatigues hitting the links decades ago, in what some have interpreted as an effort to mock either the sport or the golf-loving president at the time of the revolution, Dwight D. Eisenhower — or both.

President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, who maintains close ties with Cuba, has taken aim at the pastime in recent years as well, questioning why, in the face of slums and housing shortages, courses should spread over valuable land “just so some little group of the bourgeois and the petit bourgeois can go and play golf.”

But Cuba's deteriorating economy and the rise in the sport's popularity, particularly among big-spending travelers who expect to bring their clubs wherever they go, have softened the government's view, investors said. Cuban officials did not respond to requests for comment, but Manuel Marrero, the tourism minister, told a conference in Europe this month that the government anticipates going forward with joint ventures to build 16 golf resorts in the near future.

For the past three years, Cuba's only 18-hole course, a government-owned spread at the Varadero Beach resort area, has even hosted a tournament. It has long ceased to be, its promoters argued, a rich man's game.

“We were told this foray is the top priority in foreign investment,” said Graham Cooke, a Canadian golf course architect designing a \$410 million project at Guardalavaca Beach, along the island's north coast about 500 miles from Havana, for a consortium of Indians from Canada. The company, [Standing Feather International](#), says it signed a memorandum of agreement with the Cuban government in late April and will be the first to break ground, in September.

Andrew Macdonald, the chief executive of London-based Esencia Group, which helps sponsor the golf tournament in Cuba and is planning a \$300 million country club in Varadero, said, "This is a fundamental development in having a more eclectic tourist sector."

The other developments are expected to include at least one of the three proposed by Leisure Canada, a Vancouver-based firm that recently announced a licensing agreement with the Professional Golfers Association for its planned resorts in Cuba, and a resort being designed by Foster & Partners of London.

The projects are primarily aimed at Canadian, European and Asian tourists; Americans are not permitted to spend money on the island, under the cold-war-era trade embargo, unless they have a license from the Treasury Department.

Developers working on the new projects said they believed Cuba had a dozen or so courses before the revolution, some of which were turned into military bases. Cuba and foreign investors for years have talked about building new golf resorts, but the proposals often butted against revolutionary ideals and red tape. Several policy changes adopted at a Communist Party congress in April, however, appear to have helped clear the way, including one resolution specifically naming golf and marinas as important assets in developing tourism and rescuing the sagging economy. "Cuba saw the normal sun and salsa beach offerings and knew it was not going to be sustainable," said Chris Nicholas, managing director of Standing Feather, which negotiated for eight years with Cuba's state-run tourism company. "They needed more facets of tourism to offer and decided golf was an excellent way to go."

The developers said putting housing in the complexes was important to make them more attractive to tourists and investors, and to increase profits.

Still, John Kavulich, a senior adviser for the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, said Cuba had a history of pulling back on perceived big steps toward freer enterprise and might wrestle to explain how such high-dollar compounds could coexist with often dilapidated housing for everyone else.

"Will Cuba allow Cuban citizens to be members, to play?" he said. "How will that work out? Allowing someone to work there and allowing someone to prosper there is an immense deep ravine for the government."

But Mr. Macdonald said political issues were moot, given that Cuba already had come to terms with several beach resorts near Havana that generally attracted middle-class foreign travelers.

"It's not an issue for them," he said. "It's tourism. It's people coming to visit the country."

If the projects are built as envisioned, the tourists will enjoy not just new, state-of-the-art courses and the opportunity for a second home in Cuba, but shopping malls, spas and other luxury perks. Standing Feather, which calls its complex Estancias de Golf Loma Linda (Loma Linda Golf Estates), promises 1,200 villas, bungalows, duplexes and apartments set on 520 acres framed by mountains and beach.

The residences are expected to average \$600,000, and rooms at the 170-room hotel the complex will include may go for about \$200 a night, a stark contrast in a nation where salaries average \$20 a month.

Standing Feather said that to build a sense of community and provide the creature comforts of home among its clientele, the complex will include its own shopping center, selling North American products under relaxed customs regulations.

"It is in the area that Castro is from, in Holguin Province," added Mr. Cooke, the golf course architect.

# Associated Press

New York, New York

23 May 2011

## New US rules promise legal Cuba travel for many

HAVANA (AP) — The forbidden fruit of American travel is once again within reach. New rules issued by the Obama administration will allow Americans wide access to communist-led Cuba, already a mecca for tourists from other nations.

Within months or even weeks, thousands of people from Seattle to Sarasota could be shaking their hips in tropical nightclubs and sampling the famous stogies, without having to sneak in through a third country and risk the Treasury Department's wrath.

"This is travel to Cuba for literally any American," said Tom Popper, director of Insight Cuba, which took thousands of Americans to Cuba before such programs were put into a deep freeze seven years ago.

But it won't all be a day at the beach or a night at the bar. U.S. visitors may find themselves tramping through sweltering farms or attending history lectures to justify the trips, which are meant, under U.S. policy, to bring regular Cubans and Americans together.

So-called people-to-people contacts were approved in 1999 under the Clinton administration, but disappeared in 2004 as the Bush administration clamped down what many saw as thinly veiled attempts to evade a ban on tourism that is part of the 49-year-old U.S. embargo.

Some familiar voices on Capitol Hill are already sounding the alarm about the new policy.

"President Obama and the administration continuously say they don't want more tourism and that's not what they're trying to do. But that's exactly what's happening," said Miami Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, who was born in Ft. Lauderdale to a prominent Cuban-exile family. He argued that more travel does nothing to promote democracy on the island.

"The only thing it does is provide hard currency for a totalitarian regime," he said.

Insight Cuba is one of at least a dozen travel groups that have applied for a license to operate on the island since details of the change were issued in April. If permission comes from Washington, it could begin trips in as little as six weeks, Popper said. Based on previous numbers, he believes he could take 5,000 to 7,000 Americans each year. In the past, people-to-people travel has included jazz tours, where participants meet with musicians during the day and take in jam sessions at night. Art connoisseurs could visit studios, galleries and museums. Architecture aficionados could explore Havana's stately, but crumbling cityscape.

"Soon Americans can go salsa dancing in Cuba — legally!" trumpeted a recent press release for one would-be tour operator.

"You can go on forever," said Robert Muse, a Washington lawyer who represents several groups that have applied for licenses to operate the trips. "The subject matter is virtually limitless."

Many approved tours will likely be run by museums, university alumni associations and other institutions. They will target wealthy, educated Americans who can afford to spend thousands of dollars on a 10-day tour.

Tens of thousands went each year under people-to-people licenses from 2000 to 2003. Anyone is eligible if they go with an authorized group.

Cuban officials say privately they expect as many as 500,000 visitors from the United States annually, though most are expected to be Cuban-Americans visiting relatives under rules relaxed in 2009. That makes travelers from the United States the second biggest group visiting Cuba after Canadians, with Italians and Germans next on the list. Academic and religious travel from the U.S. is also increasing.

The guidelines published by the U.S. Treasury Department say people-to-people tours must guarantee a "full-time schedule of educational activities that will result in meaningful interaction" with Cubans.

But a previous requirement to file itineraries ahead of time is gone, possibly making it difficult to police whether tours will follow the spirit of the law.

"It's more liberal than in 2000-2003 in a lot of senses," Popper said.

Still, it's a far cry from the pre-revolution days when Havana's mob-controlled nightclubs and casinos were a playground for the likes of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. and Greta Garbo. Back then, cheap ferries and flights from Florida meant tourists could party through the night and leave in the morning without bothering to rent a room. Academic visits already under way give an idea of what may be allowed.

A recent group of Iowa State University students who came to study sustainable food and development had an itinerary packed with activities like visits to farms, a coffee plantation and an environmental reserve. They also managed to stroll Old Havana on a guided tour, visit an art museum and take in a performance of "Swan Lake" by Cuba's acclaimed National Ballet.

Agronomy professor Mary Wiedenhoef said the cultural experiences were key for students to understand Cubans and therefore an integral part of their study.

"We didn't come here to be on a Caribbean beach; we came to be on farms," Wiedenhoef said. "I didn't even pack a bathing suit."

When the Bush administration shut down people-to-people visits in 2004, it cited allegations the rules were being abused.

"You had these groups going down and they would miraculously end up in Varadero (a popular beach resort) or at Hemingway's home, or they'd end up at cigar factories," said John Kavulich, senior policy adviser to the nonpartisan U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council. "It wasn't something that was easy to defend when the State Department made inquiries."

The Obama administration would almost certainly come under pressure from anti-Castro members of Congress if a rash of Americans start posting Facebook photos of themselves smoking Cohibas and sipping Havana Club on the beach, Kavulich said.

So college kids looking for a bacchanalian spring break should probably stick to standbys like Cancun and Daytona Beach.

U.S. officials vow to weed out frivolous trips.

"If it is simply salsa dancing and mojitos, no. That doesn't pass the purposeful-travel criteria," a State Department official involved with the policy said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

If the new travel rules are politically sustainable, they have the potential to be "a big business opportunity," said Bob Guild, vice president of Marazul Charters, which offers licensed flights between Miami and Cuba and is expanding in anticipation of a surge of travelers.

"Hopefully (the U.S. government) will be issuing the licenses in a timely way and processing them quickly, and people will be able to begin going down. And we hope we can help them," Guild said. "It's a significant change."

# The Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles, California

24 April 2011



## Guidelines for visiting Cuba

**It is getting easier to visit Cuba legally. Want to go? Know the guidelines before heading to Havana.**

By Jane Engle  
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

If Cuba is on your bucket list of destinations, you may now find it easier to visit the Communist island legally. But not as a regular tourist. So put aside those daydreams of sipping daiquiris at a seaside resort.

More than three months after President Obama announced he would loosen restrictions that bar most Americans from legally visiting Cuba, the U.S. Treasury Department last week issued the guidelines to implement the changes.

That action freed organizations to apply for new licenses to offer Cuba trips and clarified which U.S. citizens may travel to Cuba without applying for a Treasury Department license.

That group of citizens remains small. Certain Americans, such as journalists, researchers, government employees on business, professionals attending conferences and people visiting close relatives, generally may go to Cuba. They are considered to hold a general license for such travel. Certain organizations, mostly nonprofits, can apply for a so-called specific license to organize trips there for specific purposes.

Tourism is not one of those purposes

Perhaps the biggest change, which Obama announced in January, was restoring the specific license for so-called people-to-people educational exchanges, something the Bush administration suspended several years ago. These broadly worded licenses opened Cuba travel to far more Americans and will likely do so again.

When such licenses were in effect, Global Exchange, a San Francisco nonprofit, was sending nearly 2,000 people a year to Cuba for purposes as diverse as language programs and bicycle tours, said Malia Everette, director of the Reality Tours division. After the licenses were suspended, that fell to fewer than 100 in 2004, she said.

"Our plan is to take a look at the final language, and update and resubmit our people-to-people license application," Everette said last week. If the license is approved, she said, it would still take months to get new trips underway.

Other trip organizers are in the same boat.

"Because each application is processed on a case-by-case basis, I cannot estimate how long it could take for a licensing determination to be made," said Marti Adams, a Treasury Department spokeswoman.

The people-to-people licenses come with strict rules. For instance, the new guidelines require that each trip participant pursue "a full-time schedule of educational exchange activities that will result in meaningful interaction" with Cubans.

Of course, thousands of Americans each year are estimated to visit Cuba illegally, typically by traveling through a third country. Although few individuals are penalized for breaking the longtime Cuba trade embargo — the basis for the travel restrictions — violators face penalties that could include civil fines of thousands of dollars, plus incalculable hassle.

So it pays to know the ground rules.

"You want to make sure that what begins as an exciting adventure doesn't end with a letter from the Treasury Department, and you're spending a lot of money for lawyers to defend yourself," said John Kavulich, senior policy advisor to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council Inc., a New York-based nonprofit organization that advises businesses on dealing with Cuba.

How do you know whether a group's trip is legal?

"The first question someone should ask is: 'Let me see your license from OFAC,'" said Kavulich, referring to Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which issues the licenses. "If they claim no specific license is needed, then ask for an opinion letter from a law firm that says this trip does meet the general license criteria." If they balk at those requests, don't sign up for the trip, he said.

Another red flag is beach time on the itinerary. The trip should focus on work, educational, humanitarian or religious activities.

¿Cuba, sí? Not for everyone, even with the new rules.



# BBC

## London, United Kingdom

### 12 February 2011

## Cuba cuts sugar price subsidies



Sugar is the mainstay of Cuba's agricultural economy

Cuba's communist government says it is liberalising the sale of sugar, after decades of subsidising its price.

It is the latest step in President Raul Castro's plan to reduce the state's role in the economy and encourage private enterprise.

Cubans will still be able to buy a limited amount of sugar at a subsidised rate with their ration books, but these too are due to be gradually phased out.

Cuba is a major sugar producer, and many Cubans have a very sweet tooth.

The state newspaper Juventud Rebelde said sugar would "gradually" be freed from state control and sold in shops and supermarkets where prices are much higher, though it did not say how quickly this would happen.

It said the measure was particularly necessary in the light of economic changes launched by President Castro last September.

### **Private restaurants**

Around a million public sector workers are being laid off and encouraged to find work in the private sector, where rules on setting up small businesses or becoming self-employed have been dramatically liberalised.

Thousands of Cubans have since applied for licenses to set up their own businesses, particularly restaurants, which will consume large amounts of sugar.

"The liberalised sale of sugar, both in its refined and raw variety, is an expected and necessary decision, above all for the successful development of the self-employed sector," Juventud Rebelde reported.

The government has also announced that the price of imported rice - another basic staple in Cuba - is to go up by more than 40%.

The phasing out of food price subsidies will cut costs for the cash-strapped communist government, which decided to reduce the state's almost total control of the economy in response to a severe economic crisis.

On Friday the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council - based in New York - said US food sales to Cuba fell by 31% in 2010, partly because Cuba was short of foreign exchange to pay for the imports.

# Reuters Americas

London, United Kingdom

11 February 2011

## **Group says US sales to Cuba nearly halved since 2008 Cuba has been in a cash crunch for more than two years**

Feb 11 (Reuters) - U.S. agricultural exports to Cuba sank by 31 percent in 2010 to \$366 million as the communist-led island's money woes continued and it looked elsewhere to buy food, a trade group said on Friday.

Cuba, which imports most of its food, gets chicken, corn, soy, wheat, pork and other products from the United States.

U.S. sales to Cuba have dropped by 48 percent since hitting a peak of \$710 million in 2008, the New York-based U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council reported.

The trade council said some of the reasons for the decline included Cuba's lack of foreign exchange and the greater importance of relationships with other countries -- especially financial benefactors Venezuela and China.

Cuba has been in a cash crunch for more than two years, which has caused it to default on many debts and freeze Cuban bank accounts for many foreign companies.

Cuban President Raul Castro invoked an austerity program that included cutting imports by a third and plans to slash more than a million workers from state payrolls.

The United States has a 49-year-old trade embargo against its longtime ideological enemy that prohibits most business between them, but exemptions are made for agricultural products and medicine.

Despite the embargo, the United States, located just 90 miles (145 km) to the north, was Cuba's fifth-largest trading partner in 2009, when the trade group said American agricultural exports to the island totaled \$528 million.

The trade council said Cuba's inability to generate more political support in the United States for changes to increase trade discouraged it from buying American.

It also said countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Vietnam, Mexico, Canada, Russia and Iran are using credits or barter to maintain or increase trade with Cuba.

# Fox News

## Washington, D.C.

### 22 January 2010



## Missing Cuban Official Stirs Questions Over Defection, U.S. Food Aid Program



Pedro Alvarez, former head of the Cuban state food Company 'Alimport' puts on a cowboy hat during the signing of a cattle shipping agreement in Havana, Cuba, Nov. 1, 2004. (AP)

By Stephen Clark

The disappearance of a top Cuban government trade official with strong ties to influential American lawmakers has elevated speculation of possible corruption and defection to the United States, even as the U.S. government says it has no idea the whereabouts of Pedro Alvarez.

Alvarez, 67, headed Cuba's food importing agency Alimport until 2009. After Congress passed a law in 2000 easing the 50-year-old trade embargo against the island to allow the U.S. cash sales of agricultural products to Cuba for humanitarian reasons, Alvarez was responsible for overseeing hundreds of millions of dollars worth of purchases.

That made Alvarez a powerful liaison between U.S. lawmakers and businesses, and the Cuban government.

"This fellow has many important and interesting things to say since he was the point man when American companies went to Cuba," said Frank Calzon, executive director of the Center for a Free Cuba.

Alvarez was relieved of his duties in 2009, just as the program took a nosedive in sales and receipts. He quickly bounced back, securing a job leading the Cuban Chamber of Commerce, but that didn't last long, having reportedly been fired last year for alleged corruption. Though few details have been revealed about the accusations against him, Alvarez was repeatedly detained by Cuban officials for questioning -- most recently in November at the same time his wife and 68 others were killed in a plane crash. He allegedly fled the island late last month.

Calzon, who said he does not know Alvarez, said he wouldn't be surprised if Alvarez was engaged in corruption. "If they were going to detain Cuban government officials for corruption, they would have to find a very huge jail because corruption is something that happens at all levels," he said. "In order to survive in Cuba, everyone has to break the law."

Cuban officials claim he has defected to the United States. Calzon says he's been informed that Alvarez is in the country and is speaking to U.S. officials although he wouldn't reveal his source. But an official with the [State Department](#) told FoxNews.com that it has no information on Alvarez's whereabouts or status.

John Kavulich, a senior policy analyst at the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, told FoxNews.com that he has known Alvarez since 1997 and believes Alvarez is in the United States though he said he has not had any contact with him.

"Nor do I expect to," he said.

But Kavulich said Alvarez could embarrass several officials, including U.S. lawmakers, if he reveals the lengths that some of them went to win more business on the Caribbean island. "He could, if he felt like it, and he believed it, he could make some politicians look like buffoons -- the U.S. lawmakers who went down there and was salivating all over them," Kavulich said.

But U.S. lawmakers who have met Alvarez during visits to Cuba said that any allegations of corruption involving Alvarez's dealings had no bearing on their talks.

"That's ridiculous," said Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., who told FoxNews.com that no sensitive or specific information was exchanged during meetings between Alvarez and U.S. lawmakers on the three occasions she traveled to Cuba with congressional delegations.

Members of the delegation simply made clear that they had a good product in the United States to offer, she said.

Emerson added that she was "shocked" to learn about his disappearance.

"He was always gracious and warm to us and to the group that was there," she said, adding that he worked with U.S. agricultural groups even more. "And so he had a lot of conversations and meetings with people from around the United States who were trying to sell to Cuba."

Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz, who met Alvarez when he led a bipartisan congressional delegation to Cuba in 2006, said neither he nor any of his fellow lawmakers have concerns about what Alvarez knows about their talks.

"I don't know what information he would have that would be sensitive for U.S. officials," he told FoxNews.com. "The trips I've taken, everyone was up-front -- they wanted more exports to Cuba."

At its peak in 2008, the U.S. exported more than \$700 million in U.S. exports of crops, meat and farm products to Cuba, a 60 percent increase from the previous year, which made the U.S. Cuba's largest food provider at the time, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission.

But exports dropped by 24 percent in 2009 to \$528 million, according to a report by the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council. They continued to fall last year to \$344.3 million through November, compared with \$486.7 million for the same period in 2009 - a 30 percent drop.

Kavulich cited political, economic and commercial reasons for the decline of U.S. exports to Cuba, including the Castro regime's pullback in its attempts to influence the U.S. political process, its lack of a foreign exchange and its trade agreements with other countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and the financial assistance it receives from Venezuela and China.

Aides to other members of the 2006 delegation did not respond to requests for comment, including Reps. Gregory Meeks, D-N.Y., Jane Harman, D-Calif., Mike Conaway, R-Texas, and Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan.

A spokesman for Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., another member of the 2006 delegation, declined to comment.

"All that we know is what we've seen in the news, so we won't be having any comment at this time," McGovern spokesman Michael Mershon said in an e-mail to FoxNews.com.

An aide to Minnesota Rep. Collin Peterson, the top Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee who introduced a bill last year that would have lifted the U.S. ban on travel to the island and ease payment restrictions on agricultural products to Cuba, did not respond to interview requests either. His bill never made it out of committee.

An aide to Rep. Leonard Boswell, D-Iowa, who has said he knows Alvarez, didn't respond to a request for comment.

At a House Agriculture Committee meeting last March, Boswell told the presidents of the American Farm Bureau and National Farmers Union that he spent time with Alvarez in Cuba.

"I spent a lot of time with him," he said. "I spent quite a bit of time with Mr. Castro. Sometimes we would be entertained. I can tell you about that a little bit."

Calzon said he assumes U.S. lawmakers who visited Cuba "behaved honorably and committed no indiscretion at any time that could embarrass them."

"I hope and I pray that every lawmaker who goes to Cuba understands they are being closely watched and the Cuban government is known for taking advantage of indiscretions," he said.

# Reuters Americas

London, United Kingdom

14 January 2011

## U.S. food sales to Cuba fall further in 2010



HAVANA (Reuters) - U.S. food sales to Cuba fell by 30 percent from January through November compared with the same period in 2009, meaning trade has halved in the last two years as Cuba bought more from allies, a U.S.-based group said on Friday.

Cuba imports about 60 percent of its food, and the United States has been the country's top provider for years despite political tensions and an almost five-decade-old U.S. trade embargo.

A Cuban official who has played a key role in the food trade between the countries has not been seen in Cuba for nearly a month and Cuban sources say he has defected to the United States.

U.S. food exports to Cuba through November were \$344.3 million compared with \$486.7 million during the same period in 2009, according to figures released by the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a New York-based group monitoring commerce between the two countries.

The Caribbean nation is required to purchase agricultural goods with cash under a 2000 exemption to the embargo, but Havana is cash-strapped due to the impact of three hurricanes in 2008, the global financial crisis and inefficiencies in the state-dominated economy.

Cuban purchases from the United States of frozen poultry, wheat, soy products, corn, beans and other products peaked at a record \$710 million in 2008, then fell 24 percent in 2009.

The report said Cuba was turning more to countries such as Brazil, France, Canada, Russia and China where it could purchase food on credit. The communist-led island was also giving preference to state-run suppliers over private ones, the report said.

Meanwhile, rumors have swirled in Cuba and abroad since late December that the Cuban official -- who acted as a go-between with U.S. politicians, trade groups and businesses to foster food sales -- is in the United States.

Pedro Alvarez headed up state food importer Alimport when the trade began in 2001. He was replaced in 2008, serving briefly as president of the Chamber of Commerce before being fired early last year under suspicion of corruption.

An employee at Alimport and another at the Chamber of Commerce said Alvarez had not been seen since December and it was "common knowledge" he fled to the United States.

Neither the United States nor Cuba have confirmed reports carried by some Miami media and Cuban-American websites that Alvarez left Cuba.

The employees said they wished to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the subject and restrictions on talking to foreign journalists.

# Nicaragua Hoy

Managua, Nicaragua

6 January 2011

## Alto funcionario cubano desertó a EE.UU. - Nicaragua Hoy

Tomado de [La Patilla de Venezuela](#)

El otrora zar de las compras de alimentos en Estados Unidos y ex presidente de la Cámara de Comercio de Cuba, Pedro Alvarez, habría escapado de la isla y se encontraría actualmente en territorio norteamericano, según CafeFuerte.com

El periodista Casto Ocando también reveló a través de su cuenta en twitter: “Fuentes: Deserta en USA cubano Pedro Alvarez, jefe del programa de compra de alimentos de Cuba que participo en los negocios de Pdval”.

Alvarez, quien presidió la empresa estatal Alimport hasta comienzos del 2009, logró abandonar Cuba a fines de pasado mes en medio de una investigación por su presunto vínculo en actos de corrupción, según reveló una fuente al periodista y bloguero Oscar Suárez, de América TeVe-Canal 41 en Miami.

De acuerdo con el testimonio obtenido por Suárez y publicado en su blog Universo Increíble, el ex funcionario salió de Cuba entre el 27 y el 29 de diciembre, aprovechando las jornadas festivas de fin de año.

La información indica que antes de la partida, Alvarez se comunicó con un familiar para decirle que se ausentaría de La Habana por un tiempo. Se desconocen aún los pormenores de la salida y el paradero en Estados Unidos.

Suárez dice que Alvarez llamó por teléfono a su suegra y le dijo escuetamente: “Yo no regreso”.

La fuente dijo conocer que en estos momentos la Seguridad del Estado está tras las pistas de cómo pudo escapar Alvarez, tratando de detectar también posibles cómplices de la fuga.

El ex dirigente fue remplazado al frente de la Cámara de Comercio a mediados del pasado año, sin que la información trascendiera en los medios oficiales de la isla.

Pocos meses después se conoció que estaba siendo investigado bajo sospechas de corrupción y permaneció detenido en varias ocasiones en el Departamento Técnico de Investigaciones (DTI) de 100 y Aldabó, en La Habana, según informó el sitio Diario de Cuba.

Coincidiendo con la investigación policial, Alvarez enfrentó la sorpresiva muerte de su esposa, Olga de la Cruz de la Llera, quien pereció en el accidente del vuelo 883 de Aerocaribbean en la zona de Guasimal, Sancti Spíritus, el pasado 4 de noviembre.

De la Cruz había viajado a Santiago de Cuba acompañando a la abogada Cándida Rosa El Chaer Benítez, de 32 años, única venezolana que pereció en el accidente.

Un embajador del Comercio

La noticia de su fuga no ha trascendido aún entre personalidades del mundo empresarial y hombres de negocios de Estados Unidos con quienes Alvarez sostuvo estrechas relaciones durante la última década.

John Kavulich, consejero principal del Consejo Económico y Comercial EEUU-Cuba, con sede en Nueva York, dijo sentirse sorprendido el miércoles respecto a la salida de Alvarez de la isla.

“No tengo ninguna información sobre eso, pero me imagino que tendría poderosas razones para hacerlo”, comentó Kavulich en conversación telefónica desde Vietnam. “Fue una persona importante en el comercio que se estableció con Cuba en estos años”.

Kavulich mantuvo vínculos con Alvarez desde que se iniciaron las ventas de productos agrícolas que autorizó el Congreso por razones humanitarias en el 2000. El intercambio comenzó en el 2001 y Alimport fue la plataforma del gobierno cubano para decidir, tramitar, y lanzar estrategias comerciales y políticas mediante las compras a empresas estadounidenses.

Durante esa etapa Alvarez fungió como un embajador ante empresarios, funcionarios agrícolas, gobernadores estatales y personalidades políticas que visitaban Cuba con el propósito de promover el comercio y abogar por el levantamiento del embargo.

En los años que Alvarez se mantuvo al frente de Alimport, Cuba se convirtió en el quinto socio comercial de Estados Unidos, con transacciones que superaron los 3,154 millones entre 2001 y 2009.

# Caracas, Venezuela

## 6 January 2011

### Desertó a EEUU alto funcionario cubano involucrado en PDVAL



(Foto Archivo)

El otrora zar de las compras de alimentos en Estados Unidos y ex presidente de la Cámara de Comercio de Cuba, Pedro Alvarez, habría escapado de la isla y se encontraría actualmente en territorio norteamericano, según [CafeFuerte.com](http://CafeFuerte.com)

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# Miami, Florida

## 5 January 2011

### Ex presidente de Alimport habría escapado a EEUU

Por WILFREDO CANCIO ISLA

- El otrora zar de las compras de alimentos en Estados Unidos y ex presidente de la Cámara de Comercio de Cuba, Pedro Alvarez, habría escapado de la isla y se encontraría actualmente en territorio norteamericano.



**Pedro Alvarez saluda a la entonces gobernadora de Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, en el 2005**

Alvarez, de 67 años, quien presidió la empresa estatal Alimport hasta comienzos del 2009, logró abandonar Cuba a fines de pasado mes en medio de una investigación por su presunto vínculo en actos de corrupción, según reveló una fuente al periodista y bloguero Oscar Suárez, de América TeVe-Canal 41 en Miami.

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La fuente dijo conocer que en estos momentos la Seguridad del Estado está tras las pistas de cómo pudo escapar Alvarez, tratando de detectar también posibles cómplices de la fuga. El Departamento de Estado dijo no tener información sobre la desertión y el posible paradero de Alvarez.

“Era un hombre de la total confianza de Fidel Castro”, expresó Alfredo Vilches, ex funcionario de Alimport y quien reside en Miami desde el 2009. “Cuando quería resolver un problema o hacer una pregunta sobre compras de alimentos, Fidel Castro no llamaba al ministro de Comercio Exterior; llamaba a Pedro Alvarez”.

El ex dirigente fue remplazado al frente de la Cámara de Comercio a mediados del pasado año, sin que la información trascendiera en los medios oficiales de la isla. Pocos meses después se conoció que estaba siendo investigado bajo sospechas de corrupción y permaneció detenido en varias ocasiones en La Habana, según informó el sitio [Diario de Cuba](#).

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