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Politico

Arlington, Virginia

28 June 2018

Senate farm bill stalled by Rubio's Cuba crusade

The Florida Republican is blocking further amendments over a provision that would promote agricultural trade with Cuba.

By LIZ CRAMPTON and CATHERINE BOUDREAU

Updated 06/27/2018 09:27 PM EDT

Senate leadership's goal of holding a floor vote on the farm bill this week is now in doubt, as key farm-state lawmakers work to resolve a new demand from Sen. Marco Rubio over a provision that would promote agricultural trade with Cuba.

The Florida Republican on Wednesday declared on Twitter that he'd block any new amendments to the farm bill unless the Senate votes to strike a provision that would allow USDA funding for foreign market development programs to be spent in Cuba — or until senators adopt his proposal to ban U.S. taxpayer dollars from being spent on businesses owned by the Cuban military.

After a full day of debate on Wednesday, the Senate had only cleared a manager's package by unanimous consent that contains 18 mostly uncontroversial amendments, including new protections for pollinators and provisions that would increase funding for the milk donation program and raise the catastrophic coverage level under an insurance program for milk producers.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) scored a win for some taxpayer watchdog and sustainable agriculture groups by securing a provision that would allow only one manager per farm to qualify for commodity subsidies under eligibility criteria set by USDA that require a person to be "actively engaged" in a farm's operation.

But no votes on standalone amendments are expected to be held until Senate Agriculture Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) and ranking member Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) can reach an agreement with Rubio, as well as fellow Cuba hard-liners Sens. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) and Ted Cruz (R-Texas). Sens. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), both of whom support efforts to change U.S. economic policy in relation to Cuba, are also involved in talks to break the impasse.

Stabenow said during a floor speech on Wednesday that she and Roberts have been working with Rubio to resolve the Cuba dispute for the last few days. After leaving the Senate floor, Stabenow told reporters that they will work through the evening in an effort to reach an agreement, which may mean modifying language pertaining to Cuba, so that it is more narrow, or adding other restrictions on Cuba.

"Hopefully we can do that, because there are a lot of folks really counting on us to be able to come together and get this done," Stabenow said, adding that the Senate still intends to hold a final vote on the farm bill this week.

Early Wednesday evening, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell filed cloture on the bill. In effect, that means that the earliest a final vote could be held would likely be Friday, unless senators agree to shorten debate.

Roberts, echoing Stabenow's point on the importance of the legislation, said the U.S. agriculture community "is in dire need of this farm bill" because producers have endured slumping commodity prices that have led to a steep decline in farm income in recent years. Further, new woes are cropping up in the form of retaliatory tariffs as trading partners respond to President Donald Trump's aggressive trade actions.

Lawmakers have cited those conditions as justification for passing a farm bill quickly to provide producers with a greater degree of economic certainty. The current farm bill expires at the end of September.

Roberts, referring indirectly to Rubio, said that passing a farm bill "is paramount over any other issue," despite some lawmakers wanting to use the farm bill as a vehicle to make a reform "that they believe is very salutary."

Rubio's opposition stems from an amendment that Heitkamp secured during the Senate Agriculture Committee's markup of the farm bill earlier this month. It would apply to USDA initiatives like the Market Access Program and Foreign Market Development program, which match taxpayer dollars to private investments by the agribusiness sector to fund projects overseas that build demand for U.S. farm goods.

Many parts of the agriculture industry are interested in opening Cuba to more U.S. farm goods, seeing the island nation as a convenient and largely untapped market. Cuba imported about \$260 million in U.S. farm goods last year, according to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

Cruz has offered an amendment that would block taxpayer funds from being used to support trade promotion programs in Cuba. Rubio's amendment, meanwhile, would codify an executive order that prohibits taxpayer dollars from being used on programs that benefit businesses owned by the Cuban military.

Following his tweet, Rubio took to the Senate floor on Wednesday afternoon to formally announce his objection.

"I'm not going to object to the ability for American farmers to market our products to a market," he said. "In the end, it's food. What I do think we should not allow, however, is the ability to spend taxpayer money in properties and in other places on the island that are owned and controlled by the Cuban military."

Heitkamp, in a statement, noted that her amendment had broad support when it cleared committee.

"This amendment passed unanimously with overwhelming bipartisan support during markup of the farm bill in the Senate Agriculture Committee," she said, adding: "This amendment would do nothing to lift current restrictions on doing business with the Cuban government, and it would provide a much-needed opportunity for American producers when so many of our important trade relationships are suffering from uncertainty."

Under current law, U.S. producers are free to travel to Cuba to meet with importers on their own dime, said Olivia Perez-Cubas, a spokeswoman for Rubio. "Taxpayer dollars shouldn't be used to subsidize private U.S. industries to travel to Cuba, especially when that money goes into the pocket of the Cuban military," she said.

Another round of fireworks on the Senate floor came earlier in the day when Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) and Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) tried to introduce an amendment that would curb Trump's authority to impose tariffs using national security justifications. The senators aimed to get the amendment tacked onto the farm bill after failing to include it as part of a defense bill earlier this month, but they were rebuffed this time when Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) blocked a vote.

Some Republicans had speculated privately earlier in the week that Corker's measure could at least get a procedural vote, as POLITICO reported previously, but any one senator can block a vote under the chamber's rules.

"I don't even know what this body has become that we can't vote on an issue that is damaging farmers more than what 20 farm bills can make up for," Corker said, arguing that the amendment should be

considered because existing and forthcoming retaliatory tariffs from China and imminent retaliation by Canada and other U.S. allies will cut into the bottom lines of many farmers and ranchers.

Brown, in response, argued that the controversial amendment would have jeopardized the farm bill and also could have forced lawmakers to choose between supporting either the agriculture industry or the steel industry. "We should not pit farmers against steelworkers," he said.

Tampa Bay Times

St. Petersburg, Florida

25 June 2018

The federal government says this man rightfully owns Havana's cruise port



A Cuban and an American flag hang in the atrium on the Carnival Paradise on June 29, 2017 at Port of Tampa during the inaugural Carnival Cruise from Tampa to Havana. [MONICA HERNDON | Times]

Paul Guzzo Times staff writer

The United States government knows him as certified foreign claim number CU-2492. But he wants to make a more personal introduction to Tampa Bay.

He is Mickael Behn, a 43-year-old U.S. citizen residing in England, where he works in television production.

And, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, Behn is the rightful owner of Havana Harbor, the cruise ship terminal for Cuba's capital city.

The harbor was taken from Behn's family when the socialist government nationalized property without compensation.

So, Behn said, those who book a cruise from Port Tampa Bay to Havana support illegal activity. "This is an American crime on an American corporation," he said. "Don't go to Havana."

The nonprofit Cuban Democratic Directorate recently put up billboards near Port Miami and is running radio ads that say those booking cruises to Cuba support the trafficking of stolen property.

Within the next few months, Behn hopes, the same strategy will be employed in Tampa.

"These are stolen goods," said Rafael Pizano, the directorate's Tampa representative. "It doesn't matter how much time has passed. It's still the same regime and same people in power who took his family's property."

Behn's great-grandfather Sosthenes Behn, founder of International Telephone & Telegraph, purchased the Havana land and built docks there in 1920. The property was passed on to Behn's grandfather William Behn in the 1940s but nationalized on Nov. 21, 1960.

"The docks were confiscated by the Castro regime literally at gunpoint," said Orlando Gutierrez, co-founder of the Cuban Democratic Directorate.

A photo shows Behn's grandfather seated at a table in his office with soldiers holding guns in one hand and bottles of Coca-Cola in the other. Behn says the photo was taken Nov. 21, 1960, but does not know by whom or why soldiers allowed it to be taken.

Another photo has Fidel Castro on a tank outside the docks, but Behn does not know if it is from Nov. 21, 1960.

When nationalized, the Havana port was worth \$9.2 million. Today, estimates Behn, the value is at least \$102 million.

The port will grow more lucrative in 2024, when another four cruise terminals are added to the existing two to accommodate a growing demand.

Cuba says it welcomed 328,000 cruise passengers from around the world to Havana in 2017 and expects that number to climb to 500,000 by the end of 2018.

Two cruise lines sail from Tampa to Havana, Carnival's 859-foot, 2,100-passenger Paradise and Royal Caribbean's 880-foot, 2,700-passenger Majesty of the Seas.

For fiscal year 2018, Port Tampa Bay expects 49 cruises — 40 offered by Royal Caribbean and nine by Carnival — sailing from Tampa will include a port call at Havana. These pay \$40,000 in fees per port in Tampa.

The nongovernmental U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council says these same ships pay the Cuban government up to \$79,000 each time they dock at the Havana port. Passengers add \$140-\$200 to the Cuban economy each day they are in Havana, a mix of what is spent with private and state-run businesses.

Nearly 6,000 U.S. citizens with property or other belongings nationalized by Cuba had their losses certified by the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission.

Among them is Jacksonville's Javier Garcia-Bengochea's family, who owned where the Port of Santiago is located. Worth \$547,365 when nationalized, Garcia-Bengochea now values it at \$180 million. Tampa does not host Santiago cruises, but Miami does. "Cruise lines have zero ethic," Garcia-Bengochea said. Behn agrees.

When Cuba cruises started a few years back, Behn expected passengers to be ferried from the ship to the island. He did not think that then-President Barack Obama or the cruise lines would port at nationalized property.

He says letters to the cruise lines educating them on the history of the Havana Harbor have been repeatedly ignored. "I thought worst case they would reimburse us," said Behn, who inherited the claim from his grandfather two years ago.

Neither Carnival nor Royal Caribbean responded to a request for comment.

Behn is disappointed that the current U.S. administration has also been lax on this issue despite President Donald Trump saying he would be tough on Cuba.

"The State Department is colluding with the cruise lines ... by ignoring our claims and not aiding us in any manner," Behn said.

Public outreach remains the only tool at the disposal of U.S. citizens whose nationalized land serves as Cuba cruise docks.

"I firmly believe most Americans would not be involved and spending their money on a cruise to Cuba if they knew they were contributing to something illegal or morally and ethically questionable," Port Santiago heir Garcia-Bengochea said, "like trafficking in our stolen property."

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles, California

22 June 2018

A year after Trump reversed Obama's opening to Cuba, the U.S. is sitting out Havana's political revamp

By Tracy Wilkinson
Washington



Workers at the U.S. Embassy in Havana leave the building on Sept. 29, 2017, after the State Department announced that it was withdrawing all but essential personnel amid a mysterious ailment suffered by several of the diplomats. (Miami Herald)

A year ago, President Trump announced tougher policies concerning Cuba, reinstating travel and trade restrictions eased by the historic Obama-era opening between Washington and Havana.

As a result, the United States today is largely sitting on the sidelines as the communist-ruled island faces potentially major changes in its economic and political relations with the region.

The problem is exacerbated because the recently reopened U.S. Embassy in Havana sits nearly empty. Most U.S. personnel were withdrawn last year after two dozen diplomats and other employees reported unexplained medical problems that left some with hearing loss or mild brain damage. The State Department added a 25th American to the list on Thursday.

As the U.S. chill with Cuba deepens, Trump has praised one of the world's most notorious despots, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, and promised economic opportunity if Kim's government gives up its nuclear weapons.

"It is baffling we are going in the opposite direction on Cuba," said Carlos Gutierrez, who was secretary of Commerce under President George W. Bush and opposes Trump's reversal on Cuba.

Trump "wants to increase prosperity in North Korea but keeps outrageous sanctions on Cuba," said Gutierrez, whose family fled the island after the 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro. "After almost 60 years of animosity, it's time to rebuild ties."

President Obama sought to rebuild those ties in December 2014, when he and Cuban President Raul Castro simultaneously announced plans to restore diplomatic relations broken since 1961, shortly after Fidel Castro took over.

Within months, Obama had loosened decades-old restrictions on Americans and U.S. companies traveling to and doing business with Cuba. Each country opened an embassy in the other's capital, and travel across the Florida Straits and mom-and-pop businesses in Cuba flourished.

During his campaign, Trump vacillated between denouncing the Cuban "dictatorship" and vowing to make a "better deal" with Havana. Once in office, he said he was "canceling" Obama's arrangement and blasted the Cuban government's human rights abuses, which consist of persistent harassment of dissidents.

The changes that Trump announced on June 16, 2017, in the heart of the Cuban exile community in Miami, were minor in scope but had a deep impact.

He restricted the ability of Americans to travel to Cuba as tourists. U.S. businesses could still operate there, although the administration later barred any dealings with an estimated 180 firms or entities tied to or controlled by the Cuban military.

The Cuban army is deeply entwined with the Cuban economy, especially in the tourism industry. Several hotels and a handful of restaurants belong to the military.

Trump said the measures would prevent money from going to Cuba's military or intelligence services and eventually force the government to open up politically and tolerate dissent. He said the goal was to stand up to "communist oppression."

But because of Trump's sweeping rhetoric in Miami, many Americans thought it was no longer possible to travel to Cuba. U.S. tourism has fallen precipitously this year, although international cruise ship visits are hitting record highs.

U.S. exports of chicken and other food and agricultural products from farm states that supported Trump remained strong. Some of that commerce is governed by regulations that predate Obama's normalization of relations.

Exports of U.S. food and agricultural products to Cuba are up 25% thus far this year compared with 2017, according to John Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, which supports business with the island.

Trump's trade restrictions largely hit small Cuban businesses, including hair salons, restaurants, car washes and bed-and-breakfasts, the kind of small-scale capitalism the White House professed to support. Less harmed was the government apparatus.

The number of small businesses in Cuba grew from 157,000 in 2010 to 567,000 at the start of 2017, according to a study by the Americas Society, a business organization based in New York. Since early 2017, the number of new applicants for private business licenses has plummeted.

More than a loss of economic opportunity, Washington seems to be sitting out on possible influence during a time of unprecedented political transition, according to academics and diplomats.

For the first time since the revolution, Cuba is ruled by someone not named Castro.

Fidel Castro, the country's legendary leader, died in November 2016. That opened the way for gradual change in the sclerotic government. His brother, Raul, took over and loosened domestic travel restrictions for Cubans and allowed the country's first dabbling in private enterprise in nearly half a century.

Miguel Diaz-Canel, handpicked by Raul as his successor, is overseeing the drafting of a new constitution and is regarded as a younger-generation figure more open to technology, internet access and other trappings of modernity.

But under Trump, the United States has refused to engage, reducing its interaction to a series of low-level meetings.

"We had more opportunity to influence them than we ever had," said John Caulfield, a veteran U.S. diplomat who headed the American interests section in Havana from 2011 to 2014, an office that served in lieu of an embassy for decades. "We have lost that" following Trump's restrictions, Caulfield said.

China and Russia, which had pulled back from the island that they once sponsored, are moving back in at full speed, financing infrastructure and other projects, raising alarms at U.S. Southern Command military headquarters outside Miami.

"The fact that we are giving them [Russia and China] a free hand to extend their presence is not in the U.S. national interest," said William LeoGrande, a Cuba expert and author of "Back Channel to Cuba," which chronicled the 18 months of secret negotiations that led to the Obama opening with Havana.

LeoGrande said Trump has essentially “outsourced his foreign policy” to Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), a member of an influential but diminishing group of conservative Cuban Americans staunchly opposed to engagement with Cuba.

Last month, apparently at Rubio’s insistence, the State Department canceled an annual seminar on Cuba that would have featured speakers who favor rapprochement. Veteran Cuba hands said the decision robbed the diplomatic corps of valuable knowledge and analysis.

“There is a short but clear path from politicizing academic outreach events to politicizing intelligence itself,” Daniel Erikson, one of the Obama administration’s point men on Cuba, wrote at the time. “The Trump Administration now finds itself on that slippery slope with regard to Cuba.”

Rubio said he would always denounce any softening toward Cuba while the current governing system is in place.

U.S.-Cuban ties were further eroded after two dozen American diplomats or their family members in Havana began reporting mysterious ailments in late 2016. The Trump administration is holding Cuba responsible, while Cuba has denied any involvement.

As a consequence, Washington pulled most of its diplomatic staff from Havana and expelled an equal number of Cuban envoys from Washington. The State Department has said the bare-bones staff at the U.S. Embassy in Havana is not able to process visas for Cubans seeking to travel to the United States.

No cause for the ailments has been found in more than a year of investigation by the FBI and other U.S. and Cuban authorities.

Tampa Bay Times **St. Petersburg, Florida** **13 June 2018**

Trump’s tougher Cuba policy having little impact on Tampa area



A Cuban and an American flag hang in the atrium on the Carnival Paradise at Port Tampa Bay. Despite President Trump announcing a stricter Cuba travel policy a year ago, both the cruises and flights from Tampa to Havana are thriving. [MONICA HERNDON | Times]

Paul Guzzo
Times staff writer

TAMPA — June 16 will mark a year since President Trump announced a tougher Cuba travel policy, but unlike in much of the nation, the changes don’t seem to have hurt local bookings to the island. The number of people traveling between Tampa and Havana has increased dramatically.

Tampa International Airport said 71,376 passengers flew between Tampa and Havana through April of this fiscal year. That’s up from 53,512 during the same period in 2017, an increase of 33 percent.

Overall, despite Trump’s vow to a Miami crowd last year to roll back much of what his predecessor Barack Obama had done with Cuba, not much has changed here for those who want to engage the island nation. Cruise ships are sailing more often to Havana. Exchange programs continue.

Residents can even stay in Cuban military-operated hotels, despite Trump's directive that Americans can't book rooms in such lodgings. Language in the mandate says Americans can't make direct payments to those hotels, said Tom Popper, president of the New York-based InsightCuba travel company.

But U.S. travel agents can still legally book these hotels for clients by indirectly paying for rooms through a third-party property management company in Cuba, Popper said. He said his lawyers have cleared that with the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

When asked about the indirect payments, OFAC responded via email, "authorized travelers may not engage in a direct financial transaction with entities and sub-entities, including hotels, on the Cuba Restricted List." Pressed again about indirect payments, OFAC did not respond.

"If this is the case, how can one consider this administration dependable?" asked Rafael Pizano, a spokesman for Tampa's Casa de Cuba, which argues against engagement with the socialist nation. "The president has taken steps, yet he needs to come through. Flights should be more restricted and cruises halted." Both are thriving locally.

"We see nothing to suggest the administration's policy direction on Cuba travel has impacted our bookings," said Brad Hawkins, a spokesman for Southwest Airlines, which offers daily flights from Tampa to Havana. Carnival cruise lines will add another 20 Havana voyages in 2019, bringing the total to 31. And Royal Caribbean is now using a larger ship that can carry more than 2,700 passengers to Havana, compared to 1,602 previously.

"Havana has been a positive offering by the cruise lines to the port," said Wade Elliot, vice president of marketing for Port Tampa Bay.

Going to Cuba for tourist reasons has long been illegal under U.S. law. But then-President Obama made it easier to visit for educational purposes by allowing individual travel.

Among Trump's June 2017 directives was to cancel individual travel to Cuba so the only way to visit was as part of a U.S. government-approved tour group — a pricier trip. It was thought this would diminish the number of Americans in Cuba. And that has been the case outside areas like Tampa with large Cuban-American populations.

Overall, in the first quarter of 2018, 40 percent fewer Americans visited Cuba than the same period last year, according to Cuban government statistics.

But InsightCuba's Popper believes that drop is because Americans thought travel to Cuba was banned outright. Once the confusion cleared, he said, his company has "seen a steady and healthy growth, about 10 percent each month."

Still, the University of South Florida's College of Public Health will not send students to Cuba next school year after doing so twice last year.

In part that's due to Trump policy penalizing U.S. citizens for spending money with military-managed companies, even accidentally, said Jesse Casanova, the College of Public Health's international programs coordinator.

But other local institutions continue Cuba exchanges. The University of Tampa still offers students the opportunity to study there, and the Florida Aquarium will continue to study Cuba's coral reefs.

Whether area business people are seeking opportunities in Cuba is harder to quantify.

While Trump banned Americans from entering into any contract with a company run by Cuba's military-controlled subsidiary GAESA, which manages as much as 60 percent of the economy, opportunities remain. But American businessmen are hesitant to announce Cuba initiatives, said John Kavulich, president of U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

"They don't want to end up on the wrong end of a presidential tweet," he said. "It simply isn't worth it."

Miami Herald

Miami, Florida

19 May 2018

More than 100 people were killed after a Boeing 737-201 on a flight from Havana to Holguín crashed and exploded in a field Friday afternoon shortly after takeoff from José Martí International Airport.

In the wake of the crash, Cuba's Council of State declared two days of national mourning.

State media reported that 104 passengers — 100 of them Cuban — as well as several Mexican crew members were aboard the plane that was leased by Cubana de Aviación, the Cuban national airline, from a Mexican company. The aircraft was nearly 40 years old.

Four survivors were taken to Calixto Garcia hospital in Havana, but one, a man, later died from burns and other trauma, according to Granma, the Communist Party newspaper. The remaining three female survivors were in serious condition. Only one of them, Emiley Sánchez de la O, 39, of Holguín, was identified by Cuban media.

An official death toll hadn't been released Friday night, but it appears that the three women may be the only crash survivors. Argentina's foreign minister said two Argentines were among the dead. Miguel Díaz-Canel, who became Cuba's president on April 19, headed to the scene after receiving word of the crash.

"The news is not very hopeful. It seems there will be a high number of victims," he said. In a Granma photo, he is seen in shirt sleeves striding through a field near the charred body of the plane.



Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel at the site of the plane crash. Shortly after departing José Martí International Airport in Havana, a Boeing 737-200 crashed in a suburb of the capital city on May 18. Adalberto ROQUE AFP/Getty Images

Díaz-Canel later appeared on Cuban state television offering his condolences on behalf of the Cuban government and Communist Party to family members. He said the events surrounding the crash would be investigated by a commission and "all information will be given."

Raúl Castro, the head of Cuba's Communist Party who is recovering from a planned hernia operation, also sent his condolences to the families of the victims.

The passenger roster included four children and an infant.

As families of the passengers desperately waited for news of their loved ones, they were asked to call these Cuban numbers for information on flight DMJ 0972: +5376497233 and +5376497234.

The plane was traveling from Havana to Holguín, 416 miles east of the capital, when it went down near the airport, which is located in the Rancho Boyeros suburb of Havana. An NBC reporter in Havana said the plane fell on a government farm and that homes in the area weren't affected.

Two busloads of the survivors' families were taken to the crash scene, and Cuban authorities were working to get family members from Holguín to Havana to help identify victims. A flight was scheduled to leave

Holguín at 10 p.m. with a representative from each family aboard. Some of the victims also lived in Las Tunas and Granma provinces.

Firefighters battled the blaze as billows of black smoke shot skyward, but when Díaz-Canel appeared on state television in late afternoon, he said the fire had been extinguished. The airport was closed shortly after the crash, leaving several flights from Havana to Miami on hold, but it reopened Friday afternoon.

The flight to Holguín took off shortly after noon and crashed at 12:08 p.m, according to Granma. Witnesses said the plane turned around to head back to the airport and struck electric cables before plummeting. Rescuers arrived within 12 minutes of the crash, according to a Granma reporter.



Nurses head toward the crash of a passenger plane carrying 104 passengers and several Mexican crew members that went down in a field shortly after taking off from Jose Marti International Airport in Havana. Ramon Espinosa AP

Shortly after the crash, ambulances, fire trucks, and cars from Cuba's Instituto de Medicina Legal could be seen speeding down Havana's central Avenue of Independence, reported 14y medio, an independent digital outlet in Cuba.

Roberto Peña Samper, president of Corporación de la Aviación Cubana, said the aircraft was the property of a Mexican company called Global Air and had been leased by Cubana de Aviación. Global Air, which was founded in 1990, provides aircraft to various flight operators.

Information provided by the Mexican government to CubaDebate, a Cuban digital news service, said the plane had been manufactured in 1979. The flight captain was identified as Jorge Luis Núñez Santos.

Although Cuban media reported there were nine crew members aboard, the Mexican government listed only five.

Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto was among the world leaders who sent condolences to the Cuban government and people.

Boeing, the manufacturer of the plane, also sent condolences. "A Boeing technical team stands ready to assist as permitted under U.S. law and at the direction of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board and Cuban authorities," the company said in a statement.

Although the plane was leased, Cubana de Aviacion's aging fleet has faced safety issues in the past.

Just Thursday, the Cuban National Aviation Authority grounded Cubana de Aviación's Antonov AN-158 fleet due to technical issues. According to Airline Geeks, the airline operated up to six of the Ukrainian aircraft, which had repeated maintenance issues. As of April, only one of the planes was still in operation. In April 2017, a Cuban military plane crashed in Artemisa province and eight people died. The plane was an AN-26.

The Associated Press reported that Cuban First Vice President Salvador Valdés Mesa met Thursday with officials from the airline to discuss improvement in Cubana's service in the face of strong criticism. Flights between Cuban cities have long been problematic.

Due to issues with internal Cuban flights, there have been instances of Cuban nationals flying to the United States and then taking a flight to the desired city in Cuba, said John S. Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

During the Obama administration, regularly scheduled commercial flights from the United States to Cuba resumed and U.S. airlines were granted authority by the Department of Transportation to fly to several Cuban cities.

The Times of London

London, United Kingdom

14 April 2018

Will handover mark end of the Castro era in Cuba? Not really

The communist bastion in the Caribbean is about to pass out of the hands of the Castros for the first time since 1959. Cuba watchers warn, however, that this should be seen as a change of uniform rather than a changing of the guard, writes Jacqui Goddard



Raul Castro's face stares down from a wall in Havana. Most Cubans have never known anything but the rule of the Castros YAMIL LAGE/GETTY IMAGES

For nearly 60 years, the Castro name has been stamped all over Cuba like a corporate brand, outlasting 11 US presidents and standing as a synonym for tyranny and intrigue.

Next week, for the first time since 1959, the island will anoint a non-Castro as president, representing a historic transition, albeit one considered unlikely to herald immediate transformation of the island.

“It’s not a changing of the guard so much as a changing of the uniform,” said John Kavulich, president of the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, of the pending handover from Raul Castro, 86, to Miguel Diaz-Canel, 57.



Raul Castro, 86, is handing over to Miguel Diaz-Canel, 57, who has appeared to encourage social liberalism while talking tough on crushing dissidents JORGE BELTRAN/GETTY IMAGES

“Castro is a military man and Diaz-Canel is not; we are just swapping Army epaulettes for a guayabera,” he added, referring to the traditional Cuban shirts favoured by the incoming premier.

Mr Diaz-Canel was not even born when the Castros and their revolutionary guerrillas ousted President Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959, replacing his government with a socialist state that evolved into a communist apparatus.

Around 80 per cent of the island’s current population has known no one other than a Castro at the helm, Raul having succeeded to the presidency from his increasingly frail brother in 2008 at an election in which the only voters among the country’s 11.5 million residents were the 605-member National Assembly. Fidel Castro died in 2016, aged 90.

Mr Diaz-Canel, a former engineer and regional government official, is one of the “lost generation” of Cubans born since the revolution but trapped in its aftermath, powerless to effect change even if they had the will. Castro influence pervades every corner of the island’s governance; ministries are stacked with

cronies, provincial leaders are devout loyalists and Raul is supreme leader of an army led by unquestioning comrades.

Crucially, Raul Castro will remain secretary-general of the Communist Party of Cuba after he steps down on Wednesday, leaving him essentially still the country's most powerful influence and oppressor-in-chief.



Fidel Castro rouses crowds of supporters in 2002. He died in 2016 aged 90
ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP/GETTY

Mr Diaz-Canel has dabbled anecdotally in progressivism, in 2013 citing the internet — heavily restricted in Cuba — as a constructive social tool and endorsing student bloggers' freedom of expression. He backs gay rights and embraced economic reforms introduced by Raul Castro that permitted private entrepreneurship, until they were shut down again. But he has also spoken longer and louder about cracking down on private enterprise, crushing dissidents and throttling the development of independent media, presenting a contradictory image.

Despite the passing years necessitating a handing-down of power from Raul Castro and his ageing commandantes to the lost generation, Mr Diaz-Canel's remit appears not to be one of reform. Devoid of political and economic power, his job is to be steward of the status quo, a puppet dancing to the old guard's tune.

“Very little is going to change. Diaz-Canel isn't a daring figure, he's not a risk taker, he doesn't have any support in the party, any support in the military, any support in the population at large,” said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the Cuban Studies Institute in Miami.

“He's just going to be a figurehead subservient to the politburo of the Communist party, which is the real basis of power in Cuba. I don't think he's going to be able or willing to put any imprint of his own on the country or challenge the military; they're interested in the continuation of the system, they are concerned about this system falling apart and they're now placing their kids in key government positions so they don't have to be.”

Nor is Mr Diaz-Canel expected to seek, want, or be offered new friendships in the region. Whereas Europe has seen opportunities to engage with Cuba economically, a US trade embargo imposed in 1960 remains in place and steps by President Obama towards rapprochement have been reversed under President Trump.

Relations soured further last year over mysterious “sonic attacks” that left 24 US embassy workers in Havana with hearing loss and neurological ailments.

Leaders gathering in Lima this weekend for the eighth Summit of the Americas have been urged by 37 former heads of state and government of Latin countries to spurn Raúl Castro, who is was due to attend. In the end Mr Castro decided not to turn up and sent Bruno Rodríguez, his foreign minister, instead.

Jorge Quiroga, the former president of Bolivia, called next week's transition “a change of tyrants in a dictatorial system”.

At a conference of civil society also taking place in Lima on Thursday, an official Cuban delegation heckled and disrupted Cuban pro-democracy advocates who are pushing for political reform and an end to human rights oppressions on the island. “Down with the worms” and “I am Fidel,” they chanted.

Mr Kavulich said yesterday: “Diaz-Canel is going to be doing what no one has had to do for nearly 60 years - and that's be a president without being a Castro. There are those among the political class who dream of Raul passing the baton to another Castro because it would make the narrative so much easier to continue.”

USA Today

Arlington, Virginia

12 April 2018

Think you can do business in post-Castro Cuba? Sorry, but it'll still be tricky

Rick Jervis, USA TODAY



(Photo: Ramon Espinosa, AP)

Doing business with Cuba has been historically tricky, with complex U.S. rules to untangle, lack of direct bank transactions and an often unreceptive Cuban government.

President Raúl Castro's retirement next week — marking the first time in nearly 60 years Cuba will be ruled without a Castro — was long expected to pave the way for increased business between the U.S. and Cuba.

But as it turns out, it may not make much of a difference. Recent policy changes under President Trump and a series of standoffs between Washington and Havana have made that process thornier than ever.

“The climate has certainly changed,” said Jay Brickman, vice president of Jacksonville-based Crowley Maritime Corp., which transports shipping containers full of chicken from Florida to Cuba. “The optimism that was there has been dampened. People are investing less time to see how they could enter the Cuban market until they see where the relations are going.”

When the two former Cold War foes announced warmer relations in December 2014, U.S. businesses were hopeful they could start doing business with Cuba, just 90 miles away. Policy changes under President Obama encouraged Americans to travel to the island and seek out business opportunities.

But Obama's changes didn't go far enough to undo restrictions under the U.S. embargo against Cuba, provisions in place since 1960 that severely restrict doing business with the communist island, said John Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade & Economic Council, a New York-based non-partisan business group that provides information and analysis on doing business in Cuba.

On the flip side, the Cuban government also resisted opening up Cuba too much to private enterprise, he said. In August, it placed a temporary halt on new licenses for bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants and other privately owned businesses. Last year, it balked on an offer by Google to expand Internet across the island through Wi-Fi connections and cellphones.

“They're skeptical,” Kavulich said. “The re-emergence of the United States' presence in Cuba is, by definition, disruptive and uncertain.”

Since taking office, Trump has unraveled some of Obama's historic changes, including barring Americans from providing money to certain Cuban businesses run by the military and doing away with “people-to-people” visas that thousands of Americans used recently to travel there.

Last year, relations took a sharp turn for the worse when U.S. officials accused Cuba of “sonic attacks” on U.S. diplomats on the island. In September, the State Department issued a travel advisory warning Americans not to travel to Cuba because of the mysterious attacks. It downgraded the notice four months later.

And in February, a task force ordered by Trump announced it was brainstorming ways to expand Internet access and improve access to information on the island, despite a formal protest by the Cuban government, which viewed it as an attack on Cuban sovereignty.

All this has had a chilling effect on U.S. travel to Cuba and business prospects between U.S. and Cuban companies, said Richard Feinberg, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of *Open for Business: Building the New Cuban Economy*.

“The hopeful scenario was that with the Castro brothers either gone or in the background, some of the bile in U.S.-Cuba relations will have been drained,” he said. “But I don’t see any interest in improving U.S.-Cuba relations in the short term.”

Brickman, the shipping executive, said he hears the concerns from his Cuban counterparts when he travels to the island on business. Cuban officials and business leaders want to know how the Trump administration will impact long-term relations with the island.

The new developments haven’t hurt his current business but his firm, like others, has put on hold any expansion plans in Cuba until relations stabilize, Brickman said.

Meanwhile, Cuba, with the economy of ally Venezuela in free fall and prospects for improved relations with the U.S. dim, will look to other countries, like Iran and China, for help, he said.

“If the U.S. door for right now is not as open, perhaps there are other doors with more benefits for them,” Brickman said.

Financial Times

London, United Kingdom

4 March 2018

Cuba braced for life after the Castros Transition comes at a delicate time for the island Raúl Castro is due to step down on April 19



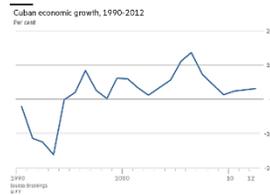
By John Paul Rathbone, Latin America Editor

Niuris Higuera climbs with heavy tread up the wrought-iron staircase to Atelier, a 50-seat restaurant that boasts graceful wood-paneled rooms and a broad terrace with sweeping views of the Havana skyline. Business seems to be booming. Outside, Havana is bathed in the tangerine light of sunset. Inside, there is a happy hum of dining tourists and the cheerful clink of glasses. Yet Ms Higuera is in a funk.

As with most nascent entrepreneurs in Cuba’s fledgling private sector — and indeed many Cubans — she is nervous. “Things will change for the better, because they have to,” says the 47-year-old chef fatalistically. There is good reason for Ms Higuera’s concern.

On April 19, Raúl Castro, 86, will step down as president and is likely to be replaced by Miguel Díaz-Canel, 57, Cuba’s vice-president. It is the first time in almost 60 years that a Castro brother will not hold the post, and while the presidency is a largely symbolic role, the power shift comes at a delicate moment for the communist island. Cuba’s Soviet-style economy, battered by hurricanes and hurt by dwindling aid from crisis-ridden Venezuela, is on the rocks.

The state has seemingly cracked down on private businesses, again. And a once-budding relationship with the US, Cuba's arch-enemy, has deteriorated after Donald Trump, the US president, partially reversed the detente launched by his predecessor.



Around 1m US visitors, over half of them Cuban-Americans, travelled to the island last year, spending approximately \$650m, according to the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a consultancy. But tighter US travel restrictions have since slashed visitors. Total tourist visits in 2017 were 4.7m.

“It’s been brutal,” says Ms Higuera. “Americans used to mingle with the Cubans. They visited private restaurants, they rented private homes, they used private transport. Other businesses then serviced them. But now the [supply] chain has broken. The impact has been very strong.” A mysterious series of so-called sonic attacks that affected at least 24 US diplomats and their families in Havana, has further chilled tourism.

The State Department’s current advisory recommends that visitors “reconsider travel to Cuba due to health attacks.” Outside hotels, the restored 1950s cars that once whisked US visitors on joyrides now stand idle. Cubans who rent out their homes via services such as Airbnb report falling bookings and prices. “It’s logical: if you open a webpage, say, of TripAdvisor in the US and search for Cuba, you get a warning message. So obviously that has an impact . . . Americans don’t come,” says Leire Fernandez, co-founder of Clandestina, a graphics and T-shirt business in colonial Havana. “Our experience has been a 30-40 per cent drop in sales. It’s been the same for everyone.”

But Cuba’s private sector, which has expanded almost fourfold to account for almost 600,000 jobs or an eighth of the workforce since Mr Castro introduced reforms eight years ago, has not only been hurt by US actions. The Cuban state is also seemingly clamping down. Several business licenses have been revoked as part of a process of “rectification” — most notably of Starbien, a restaurant co-owned by the son of a former interior minister. There are rumours of more curbs to come. “We have to see what the final rules are,” says Miguel Ángel Morales, owner of La Moneda Cubana, a restaurant in Old Havana. “But if there are cancellations or limits on private business licenses, as the rumours suggest, that could create unemployment, which is not what the national strategy surely needs to be.”



Restored 1950s cars stand idle as tourist numbers dwindle © Reuters

The biggest unknown is April 19, when Mr Castro will step aside from the presidency. Most Cubans simply shrug their shoulders about its significance as it is a political affair beyond their reach. They are more concerned about getting by from day to day. But a leaked video that showed Mr Diaz-Canel taking a traditional hardline in a private meeting of Communist Party members, has unsettled nerves. Mr Diaz-Canel is a burly party functionary from the provinces and little is known of what he believes — or even if he will finally be chosen as successor.

Cubans will “vote” in a pre-ratified slate of candidates for the National Assembly on March 11, which will then ratify formally Mr Castro’s successor in April. Mr Castro is expected to remain head of the Communist party and the armed forces when he steps down. “We don’t know who the new president will be,” says Marta Deus, co-founder of Deus Accountants, which provides accounting services to the self-employed. “But I hope it will be a young person, who understands the social changes going on in the world.”

At least the rampant food, drink and price inflation that was driven by yesteryear's tourist boom and that priced many goods beyond most Cubans' reach, has cooled. "There have been some positive sides to the Trump effect too," says Clandestina's Ms Fernandez. Internet access also continues to grow.

Privately-employed coders have even sub-contracted their services to design Spanish websites abroad as bandwidth has expanded. "That kind of work would have been technically impossible two years ago," says one, who asked to remain anonymous.

But such opportunities are beyond the reach of most, and after six decades of struggle there is a widespread sense of resignation, co-mingled with faint hopes for change as the so-called historic generation of ageing Cuban leaders step aside.

"Being Cuban is like Sisyphus," says Esther Cardoso, a leading actress, who rents out her home to make ends meet. "You roll a stone to top of the hill, and every night it falls back again. Now is not a time for dreams, it's a time to make money and get by. That's what Cuba has become today. It's sad."

Tampa Bay Times

St. Petersburg, Florida

28 February 2018

Cuban Club in Ybor City tries to convince financiers it does no business in Cuba



A statue of Jose Marti, considered the George Washington of Cuba, adorns the entrance to the historic Cuban Club, 2010 14th Ave in Ybor City. The club's \$190,000 loan for renovation work was frozen by financial institutions seeking assurances it isn't doing business with Cuba. [SKIP O'ROURKE | Times]

Paul Guzzo Times staff writer

YBOR CITY — The historic Cuban Club is planning to start some renovations — as soon as a \$190,000 loan already approved hits the bank. That was supposed to happen Friday. On Tuesday evening, the club still was waiting.

The reason has nothing to do with the club's credit. Instead, it's about long-standing trade laws banning most U.S. financial transactions with a country shunned by the federal government for embracing Marxism more than five decades ago. The Cuban Club, it seems, has "Cuban" in its name.

Financial institutions flag any transaction with phrases related to Cuba until it can be verified — through research by the institution or by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

The money should be freed up this week, once everyone is convinced no business is being done with Cuba, said Patrick Manteiga, secretary of the Cuban Club's 501(c)(3) fundraising foundation. Still, Manteiga isn't happy. "This is word discrimination," he said. "And this could affect us again."

Some transactions with Cuba are permitted under licenses from the Office of Foreign Assets Control, or OFAC, including travel-related services, payments for exports and for imports, said John Kavulich of the New York-based U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

But U.S. financial companies "remain extremely cautious, viewing each Cuba-related transaction as unauthorized until proven otherwise," Kavulich said.

Structural repairs estimated at \$2.6 million are planned for the Cuban Club, a four-story, yellow brick structure with a neoclassical design built in 1917. The Cuban Club was built to replace an earlier center destroyed by fire and served originally as home to a recreational and mutual aid society for Cuban immigrants who founded Ybor City. It now honors that legacy.

To help pay for the renovations, the club obtained a \$1 million reimbursement grant from the state of Florida. The grant must be used by June, so time is of the essence.

Money from a Century Bank loan was to be available Friday. But Century's title company, Fidelity National Title of Florida, uses Bank of America, which suspended the outgoing wire transfer, according to emails among Manteiga, Century and Fidelity that were shared with the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Bank of America released the money Tuesday but Manteiga was told the wire transfer might be frozen again as it passes through the other institutions.

The Cuban Club is the latest in a long line of interests so see its transactions held up. In 2015 and 2016, for instance, Miami's MyCubanStore.com discovered that customers' PayPal transactions were routinely suspended as they tried to purchase its Cuban fashions.

Manteiga favors restoring full relations with Cuba, he said, but not everyone in the club does — and he sees the membership's stand on the question as irrelevant in its business dealings. "Just Google us," Manteiga suggested, "to find out we don't do business with Cuba."

Times Record

Fort Smith, Arkansas

28 January 2018

Community Matters: How to level the playing field for Arkansas agricultural producers

By Sen. John Boozman / Guest Column

New data released by the U.S.-Cuba Trade Economic Council show that Arkansas's agricultural producers continue to lose out under Washington's current restrictive trade policy with the island nation.

The top two commodities Cuba purchased from American producers in 2017 are among the top commodities produced in Arkansas — chicken leg quarters and soybeans.

A deeper dive into the data shows that chicken and soybean products make up over 80 percent of the total food product/agricultural product exports from the U.S. to Cuba last year.

According to the Arkansas Farm Bureau, the Natural State has about 2,500 farms that produce chicken. Arkansas is the 10th largest soybean producing state and exports almost half of the state's crop.

In theory, the Cuban market is ripe for Arkansas's poultry and soybean producers. Add rice to that list, which is a staple of the Cuban diet, and you have the potential for a significant economic boost for our state.

In reality, however, this is not the case.

U.S. producers are still unable to fully tap into the market because federal law does not allow private financing for agricultural trade with Cuba. This misguided policy creates a major roadblock to trade with the cash-strapped island nation.

There is a bipartisan solution to this problem. Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and I introduced the Agriculture Export Expansion Act to lift the ban on private banks and companies offering credit for agricultural exports to Cuba. This would help level the playing field for exporters across the country and support American jobs.

This commonsense solution does not put the American people on the hook for business deals with Cuba. It simply removes the regulatory barrier banks and companies run into when trying to offer private financing to Cubans for the sale of U.S. agricultural commodities. Private lenders would assume all the risk.

Nearly all international trade relies on credit. Current U.S. policy restricts trade with Cuba to cash-only transactions, putting American farmers on the sidelines while competitors like China, Vietnam and Brazil actively engage in Cuba's \$2.4 billion market.

Removing this restriction would help level the playing field for Arkansas' farmers and exporters while simultaneously exposing Cubans to American ideals, values and products.

That last point is important. Following Fidel Castro's death, then President-elect Trump said, "Our administration will do all it can to ensure the Cuban people can finally begin their journey toward prosperity and liberty."

I share the President's desire to see democracy take hold in Cuba, as well as his commitment to ending human rights abuses carried out by the Castro regime. I encourage him to consider a more effective approach of opening a line of communication and building a working relationship with governments in need of democratic assistance.

Trade between nations creates that open line and builds those relationships, allowing for the type of person-to-person contact that can bring real change to the world. In normalizing trade relations, you not only trade goods, but ideas. The two go hand-in-hand. Normalizing relations will allow us to remain competitive and create jobs at home, while pushing for human rights and democratic change in Cuba.

Passage of the Agriculture Export Expansion Act would be a small step in that direction, but a big victory for American farmers and the Cuban people.

Politico

Arlington, Virginia

25 January 2018

MORE U.S. AG EXPORTS HEAD TO CUBA: Trump's hard-line rhetoric toward Cuba may have led to a fraying of Obama-era diplomatic ties, but exports to the island nation paint a very different picture. Agricultural exports to Cuba equaled more than \$250 million in 2017, according to reports from the U.S.-Cuba Trade Economic Council. These numbers — from January to November 2017 — show an \$50 million increase in exports of food products and ag commodities compared with 2016.

Lots of chicken in Cuba: In terms of dollar value, more than half of what's being sent to Cuba is chicken, according to the New York-based business group's numbers. For the past decade, chicken — whether as leg quarters or whole — has consistently topped the list of products Cubans most purchase from the U.S. The island nation has also regularly bought U.S. soybeans and corn.

But those numbers are a drop in the bucket: Cuba largely relies on imports with an over \$2 billion annual market to buy agricultural products abroad. However, U.S. producers are still unable to fully tap into the market because the American government does not allow private financing for Cubans, posing a huge challenge for the cash-strapped island.

“The community clearly wants to export to Cuba and for agribusiness — where it’s often been seen as off-limits — we see the movement there’s been,” Madeleine Russak, communications director for Engage Cuba coalition, told MA. “More people are encouraged and looking to Cuba as a potential export market.”

Hoosier Ag Today

Zionsville, Indiana

23 January 2018

NAFB News Service
23 January 2018

U.S. Ag Benefiting from Trade with Cuba

By NAFB News Service -

According to new figures released by the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, U.S. agriculture is benefitting from trade with Cuba. Exports of food and agricultural products from the U.S. to Cuba in November of 2017 were pegged at \$21.2 million, compared to \$10.59 million in November 2016, and \$6.24 million in November of 2015. There were also substantial increases in sales of farm equipment and products for hotels and airlines. Chicken in various forms was the biggest export, followed by herbicides.

In 2015 and 2016 the list of products authorized for export to Cuba from the United States was expanded, as long as the importers were not affiliated with the Cuban government. John Deere and Caterpillar opened agricultural distribution centers and have been the biggest exporters of farm equipment, but neither company has issued sales figures for their operations in Cuba.

Source: NAFB News Service

Radio/TV Marti

Miami, Florida

24 January 2018

Bajo gobierno de Trump repuntan ventas agrícolas de EEUU a Cuba, asegura experto

Rolando Cartaya



Trump en el acto celebrado en Teatro Manuel Artime de Miami el 16 de junio de 2017 donde anunció la nueva política de EE.UU. hacia Cuba.

Hasta noviembre de 2017 se habían exportado a la isla \$ 248,7 millones, \$ 16 millones más que en todo 2016, reporta John Kavulich, director del Consejo Comercial y Económico Estados Unidos-Cuba. Aumentan ventas de maquinaria agrícola y donaciones humanitarias.

Nuevas cifras recién publicadas por el Consejo Comercial y Económico Estados Unidos-Cuba (USCTEC), entidad privada que monitorea las relaciones económicas bilaterales, revelan que las exportaciones estadounidenses de alimentos y productos agrícolas a la isla más que se duplicaron en noviembre de 2017 comparadas con el mismo mes de 2016, superando así, un mes antes de fin de año, el total registrado en los 12 meses previos.

En noviembre pasado se vendieron a Cuba \$21 millones 277.713, comparados con \$10 millones 594.557 en noviembre de 2016, y \$ 6 millones 243,680 en el mismo intervalo de 2015.

De esta cifra, los productos de pollo congelado encabezaron como en otros años las compras cubanas con casi \$ 17 millones, seguidos por la adquisición de herbicidas, con unos \$3,78 millones. Otras importaciones principales pagadas por La Habana fueron galletas dulces (\$351.943) y chocolates y cacao a granel o para venta al detalle (\$ 297.898).

John Kavulich, director del USCTEC, destacó a Martí Noticias el sustancial incremento de las compras de productos de cacao en los últimos dos años, por encima de otras importaciones tradicionales destinadas al consumo interno como soya y maíz.

La venta directa de productos agrícolas y alimenticios a Cuba, que debe ser pagada en efectivo por La Habana, es autorizada por la Ley de Reforma a las Sanciones Comerciales y Fortalecimiento de las Exportaciones (TSREEA por sus siglas en inglés) que el Congreso estadounidense aprobó en 2000.

Aunque no estaba disponible el mes de diciembre de 2017, Kavulich apuntó que las compras cubanas autorizadas por TSREEA en los primeros once meses de la administración Trump (enero a noviembre) superaban ya (\$248 millones,703,676) las de todo el 2016 (\$232,064,645), con lo que Cuba ascendió del lugar 55 al 52 entre los 229 clientes de este mercado estadounidense.

Otra exención al embargo es la venta a la isla de productos para la salud como equipos, instrumentos y suministros medicos y farmacéuticos, autorizada por la Ley de Democracia Cubana o Ley Torricelli de 1992. El propósito con que se usan estos productos requiere ser verificado, pero Cuba no necesita pagarlos en efectivo.

En estos rubros las importaciones cubanas cayeron de \$ 6 millones 121.425 en 2016 a \$ 4 millones 835,222 hasta noviembre de 2017. Los envíos incluyeron medicamentos como penicilina e insulina, pasta dental, utensilios de laboratorio, equipos electrónicos médicos y quirúrgicos, suministros oftalmológicos y cánulas.



El fabricante de maquinaria agrícola estadounidense John Deere está vendiendo a Cuba tractores de su serie 5000 (75-115 HP).

El informe presenta una novedad en las relaciones comerciales: las importaciones hechas por las cinco aerolíneas estadounidenses que sirven a Cuba, la empresa norteamericana Marriot, que tiene contratos para administrar dos hoteles en la isla, y dos grandes fabricantes americanos de maquinaria agrícola que han establecido centros de distribución en Cuba: John Deere, con sede en Moline, Illinois, y su competidora Caterpillar, basada en Peoria, Illinois. Entre todos totalizaron en noviembre de 2017 \$ 921,996, aunque la mayor parte, unos \$756.000, correspondió a una de las dos empresas afincadas en Illinois.

Kavulich destacó que dichas importaciones, realizadas por entidades cubanas no vetadas por EE.UU., se concentraron en maquinaria agrícola, fabricada por John Deere, principalmente tractores de la serie 5000 (75-115 HP), pero también cultivadoras, fertilizadoras y trilladoras, implementos agrícolas, piezas de repuesto y otros insumos. John Deere Finance se ocupa de respaldar las exportaciones. Caterpillar también ha anunciado que financiará sus ventas a Cuba.

USCTEC también reporta que en 2017 se produjo un aumento de las donaciones desde EE.UU. al país caribeño esto es, bienes humanitarios como alimentos, ropa, artículos para la salud, libros, etc., que son generalmente enviados a la isla en aviones de carga o barcos portacontenedores, y no incluyen los entregados por personas.

El valor de dichas donaciones de enero a noviembre de 2017 fue de \$ 5 millones 317,289 comparado con \$ 4 millones 755,859 en todo 2016.