

## **Visas for Cubans have a new limit. The change affects U.S. family and shopping trips.**

BY MARIO PENTÓN

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The top U.S. diplomat in Havana, Mara Tekach, has announced that visas for Cubans will be limited to just one entry. They also will be valid for only three months.

The change, which takes effect Monday, directly affects the B2 visas for family visits, health consultations and tourism and shopping trips, which were until now issued for five years and allowed multiple entries.

Tekach, who is deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Havana, said the change was the result of a “reciprocity alignment” underway at all U.S. embassies around the world.

“When one country issues a visa or tourism card to U.S. citizens for a certain period, we will do the same for citizens of that country who receive a U.S. visa,” she explained.

Cuba issues U.S. citizens a visa that allows only one entry and is good for two months but can be extended for another month. In contrast, the United States had been issuing Cubans visas that were good for five years and allowed multiple entries.

Tekach added that there would be no change in other categories of visas issued to Cuban citizens.

The measure is a harsh blow to island residents with relatives in the United States, several Cubans told el Nuevo Herald. It also affects many small business owners who travel to South Florida or Mexico to buy supplies. Mexico does not require visas for Cubans who already have U.S. visas.

“I have had the U.S. visa for three years. I use it to go to Miami and Cancun to buy the things I need for my business. This blocks me,” Yonierkys Estupiñán, who runs a private restaurant and other businesses in the city of Cienfuegos, said in a telephone interview.

The Obama administration extended the visas for Cubans to five years in 2013, shortly before it announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with Havana.

Cubans score one of the highest rates of rejections for tourist visa applications.

To reunite with family in Miami, these Cubans must travel to Bogota

A phone call interrupted Maydelin Alfonso Vázquez's monologue in the lobby of the Montecarlo Hotel, about six blocks from the U.S. embassy. Some of the Cubans staying there while they waited for U.S. visas listened to her litany of difficulties.

By José A. Iglesias

U.S.-Cuba relations have worsened with President Donald Trump in the White House. He has accused Havana of failing to protect 26 U.S. diplomats affected by alleged acoustic attacks, and reduced staffing at the embassy by 60 percent.

The president also has criticized the island for human rights violations and the role it plays in supporting the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela, its key economic ally. The Cuban government has denied any responsibility for the attacks or interference in Venezuela.

After the United States reduced its diplomatic staffing in Havana, applications for tourism, family visit and emigration visas have been handled in U.S. consulates in third countries, increasing the price and complications for the Cuban applicants.

A U.S.-Cuba immigration accord approved by the Clinton administration in 1996 guarantees 20,000 visas to Cubans each year in order to stem illegal emigration. An undetermined number of Cubans drowned in the Straits of Florida during the so-called rafter crisis in 1994.

The United States did not meet the 20,000-visa goal in 2018, for the first time in the 22 years since the agreement was signed.

Cuban medical workers flee to Colombia to await U.S. visas

Discel Rodriguez is one of many Cuban medical workers who fled Venezuela to Colombia hoping for quick passage to the United States through the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program. But months dragged on with no response from the U.S. Embassy.

By McClatchy

Emilio Morales, director of the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group, said the change will be “a blow to the average Cuban” and not to the island’s government.

“The people who will really feel this are the tens of thousands who have this type of visa and are not necessarily tied to the government. Many of them supply the underground economy on the island, so they will suffer a collateral damage,” Morales said.

The economist added that some Cuban visitors work illegally during their stay in South Florida. “Others bought merchandise here to sell on the island. And there were

others who carried packages and remittances when they returned to the island. All that exchange between the two shores will be affected by the new measure,” he said.

The crisis in Venezuela is one of the factors pushing Cuba to the edge of an economic collapse much like the one it experienced in the early 1990s amid the disappearance of the Soviet Union, several experts have predicted.

Relations with the Cuban diaspora — 90 percent of which lives in the United States — are vital for the island. The Havana Consulting Group has reported that in 2017, cash remittances sent to Cuba equaled 50.8 of the Cuban population’s total income.