

## Washington and the Cuban Migration Crisis

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*United States legislation promotes emigration from the island, but for nearly a month now, thousands of Cubans attempting to travel to the United States have been blocked in Costa Rica.*

Nearly 6,000 Cubans wishing to emigrate to the United States, are stuck in Costa Rica, where they have been denied the opportunity of continuing their journey north. After arriving in Ecuador, the only Latin American country that does not require Cubans to obtain entry visas, they undertook a long journey across the continent, in order to arrive mainly in Miami. But their passage was brought to a standstill in Costa Rica. Indeed, central American countries, from Nicaragua to Mexico, refuse to permit the migrants, their numbers often riddled with members of criminal networks, to pass through their territory and are asking Washington, the entity primarily responsible for this situation, for a policy response.(1)

Indeed, Cubans who enter the United States illegally are welcomed with open arms, while illegal immigrants from other nations are immediately arrested and deported to their countries of origin. This selectivity results from the United States's historical commitment to the use of migration as a weapon to undermine the Cuban Revolution.(2)

In 1959, the United States began demonstrating its hostility toward the government of Fidel Castro. It opened its doors to the heirs of the former military regime of Fulgencio Batista, including security forces that had been involved in violent and bloody crimes. Washington also welcomed the country's economic elite and encouraged the departure of highly qualified personnel in an effort to destabilize the society.

The impact on Cuba was harsh. Indeed, in such a vital sector as health, nearly half of all Cuban doctors, some 3,000 in total, responded to the U.S. siren song that promised them a better life. This episode plunged the country into a serious health crisis. Other highly skilled professionals were also encouraged by U.S. authorities to leave the island for more lucrative economic opportunities in Florida.(3)

In its war against Cuba, Washington decided to use the migration issue to destabilize the country. In 1966, Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act, a law unique in the world, which states that any Cuban who immigrated to the United States either legally or illegally, peacefully or by force, on January 1, 1959 or later, will automatically obtain the status of permanent resident. After a year and a day, various social benefits accrue (housing, work, medical coverage, etc.) as well as the possibility of obtaining United States citizenship after five years.(4)

This is a great tool for inciting illegal emigration. For nearly 50 years, the richest country in the world has opened its doors to the population of a small poor Third World country with

limited resources and victim, moreover, of extremely severe economic sanctions.

Logic suggests that the U.S. embassy in Havana would issue visas to each applicant under this law. This is not, however, the case. On the contrary, Washington severely limits the number of visas granted to Cubans each year in order to stimulate illegal and dangerous emigration and manipulate crises for political ends. Thus, without visas, Cubans wishing to emigrate to the United States must risk their lives on makeshift rafts, while hoping not to be intercepted by the Coast Guard, or make long journeys across the continent at the mercy of human traffickers and criminal gangs of all sorts.

*The New York Times* has called for the repeal of the Cuban Adjustment Act :

“[...] it is time to do away with the policy, a Cold War relic that is hindering the normalization of relations between Washington and Havana [...] This system has been a boon for human smugglers in Latin America and created burdens for countries from Ecuador to Mexico through which they move [...] The Obama administration should negotiate a new agreement with the Cuban government that makes orderly immigration the norm [...] American officials are at a loss to explain the special treatment for Cubans, which stands in stark contrast to the harsh way the United States typically treats Central Americans, including minors, many of whom are fleeing for their lives.”(5)

Furthermore, for almost 10 years, Washington has also applied a policy designed to plunder Cuba – a country recognized worldwide for the excellence of its health care system – of its doctors. Indeed, in 2006, the Bush administration adopted the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program whose aim it is to encourage the emigration of Cuban medical professionals to the United States by offering them the opportunity to practice medicine there. This program specifically targets the 50,000 or so Cuban doctors and other health personnel who, in order to assist the poor, practice in the rural areas of some 60 Third World countries. President Barack Obama, in power since 2009, has not eliminated this program, despite his statements favoring a normalization of relations with Cuba.(6)

The repeal of the Cuban Adjustment Act and the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program is essential in order to build a peaceful relationship between Cuba and the United States. Washington cannot expect to achieve an *entente cordiale* with Havana while maintaining hostile laws that endanger the lives of Cuban citizens.

Thus, a year after the historic reconciliation of December 17, 2014, between Cuba and the United States, many points of disagreement remain between the two countries. For example, President Obama, despite his positive statements, has still not made use of all his powers to bring an end to economic sanctions. These sanctions affect the most vulnerable sectors of the Cuban population and constitute the principal obstacle to the development of the island.

## Notes

1. *El Nuevo Herald*, “Presidente de Costa Rica viajará a Cuba en medio de crisis por migrantes”, December 19, 2015.

2. *U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services*, “Cuban Adjustment Act”, 1996. <http://www.uscis.gov/green-card/other-ways-get-green-card/green-card-cuban-native-or-citizen> (site

consulted December 25, 2015).

3. Elizabeth Newhouse, « Disaster Medicine : U.S. Doctors Examine Cuba's Approach », *Center for International Policy*, July 9, 2012. <http://www.ciponline.org/research/html/disaster-medicine-us-doctors-examine-cubas-approach> (site consulted July 18, 2012).

4. *United States Congress*, "Cuban Adjustment Act", November 2, 1966. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-80/pdf/STATUTE-80-Pg1161.pdf> (site consulted December 25, 2015).

5. *The New York Times*, « A New Cuban Exodus », December 21, 2015.

6. *United States Department of State*, « Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program », January 26, 2009. <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/fs/2009/115414.htm> (site consulted December 25, 2015).

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