

Cuba ending nine-year ban on new private taxis

Cuban officials say they are ending a nearly decade-long ban on new licenses for private taxis — and they will even let cabbies set their own fares.

The rules newly published in the official newspaper will also allow private taxis in rural areas, though they will be under greater restrictions than city taxis. Many car-owning Cubans already offer private taxi services, but run the risk of having their cars confiscated if they are caught.

The new rules appear to add a dose of the free market to help the communist system's struggling transportation system. Officials in earlier years cracked down on private taxis, accusing them of fomenting a black market in fuel.

Sources: AP, Miami Herald

Cuba policy experts say US should engage Cuba

Several U.S. experts on policy toward Cuba said Monday January 12 that President-elect Barack Obama should make the first move to engage with the communist government and not wait for the island to release political prisoners or meet other conditions.

Speaking in a teleconference arranged by the Center for Democracy in the Americas, the Cuba specialists said negotiations on prisoner releases or other issues can follow an initial meeting. The independent Washington-based center has repeatedly urged an end to U.S. sanctions and restrictions on Cuba.

The policy experts also said small U.S. steps now toward lifting restrictions could ease open Cuban society and polish America's tarnished image in Latin America.

Cuban officials' "desire for engagement is there and has been signaled repeatedly," said Jake Colvin, a vice president for global trade issues at the National Foreign Trade Council, a business group that opposes unilateral U.S. trade restrictions against other countries. "The engagement comes first and the negotiation comes later. I think we can talk without preconditions."

Supporters of trade sanctions on Cuba, including outgoing President George W. Bush, insist that the communist leadership should release political prisoners and hold direct, competitive elections before the embargo is lifted.

Obama, who assumes the American presidency on January 20, has said he is willing to talk with Cuban officials and would "immediately" lift all restrictions on family travel and remittances to the island, which were tightened by the Bush administration

President Raul Castro has said he would be willing to talk with the new American president on equal terms.

Alberto R. Coll of DePaul University College of Law said there are many U.S. steps that "would only lead to a gradual opening in Cuban society". He said the U.S. refusal to talk with Cuban officials has only slowed change on the island.

Source: AP

Report: 9 Ways for US to Talk to Cuba and for Cuba to Talk to US

Break the diplomatic deadlock with Cuba, New report recommends collaboration on nine bilateral issues. If Barack Obama and Raúl Castro sat down for negotiations, what could they talk about?

According to a retired Four Star General, and experts who favor engagement in science, commerce, and other fields, the leaders could authorize cooperation in military affairs, law enforcement, hurricane preparedness, health care, migration, trade, energy development, academic exchange and family travel, to solve problems and build the diplomatic trust required to end the conflict between the U.S. and Cuba.

Their recommendations are contained in a new report – “9 Ways for US to Talk to Cuba and for Cuba to Talk to US” – released on Monday January 12 by the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA).

“Our ‘9 Ways Report’ lays out a strategy for the Obama administration to rebuild U.S.-Cuba relations,” said Sarah Stephens, the CDA director and co-editor of the report. “If we could cooperate with Cuba to fight drugs and human smuggling, if our businesses could trade with Cuba and help develop its energy resources, if we could learn why Cuba is better at protecting its people from hurricanes and natural disasters, our people would be better off and our diplomats could develop the trust they need to bring our two countries together.”

The report contains essays with detailed recommendations by Sarah Stephens, Alan Webber, Gen. James T. Hill (military affairs), Randy Beardsworth (security cooperation), Robert Bach (migration), Peter Bourne (health cooperation), Jake Colvin (commerce), Ivor van Heerden (hurricane preparedness), Amy Myers Jaffe and Ronald Soligo (energy development), Franklin W. Knight (academic exchange), Alberto R. Coll (the role of Cuban Americans), and Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

The report was produced by the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA) and its Freedom to Travel project. Since 2001, the Freedom to Travel project has taken bi-partisan delegations to Cuba that included 5 U.S. Senators, 28 Members of Congress, and 30 professional staff.

Copies of the "9 Ways" report are available via download at the CDA website here.

http://www.box.net/index.php?rm=box_download_shared_file&file_id=f_238078916&shared_name=5r18tvkfm4

Source: Center for Democracy in the Americas

Obama wants to lift travel bans on Cuba

Sen. Hillary Clinton said on Tuesday January 13 the incoming Obama administration wanted to lift travel restrictions on families wishing to visit relatives in Cuba and urged Havana to make its own concessions.

Speaking at her Senate confirmation hearing, Clinton said she hoped the Cuban government would look at freeing political prisoners and open up the economy.

“The president-elect (Barack Obama) is committed to lifting the family travel restrictions and the remittance restrictions. He believes ... that Cuban-Americans are the best ambassadors for democracy, freedom and a free market economy,” she said.

Obama has said previously he favors relaxing restrictions on travel and cash remittances.

Source: Reuters