

### For relatives, travel to Cuba just got easier

Cuban Americans are now free to visit relatives on the island once a year and stay as long as they like, using a new license issued by the Obama administration.

With the new license, created Wednesday March 12, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control officially lifted the tightened restrictions enacted by President Bush in 2004, which had limited trips to every three years and only to see immediate relatives.

A posting on the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) website indicates Cuban Americans can follow regulations that existed before Bush tightened the rules in June 2004.

The rules now allow:

- A trip every 12 months with a general license that does not require an application process.
- Passengers wanting to travel again within the same year can apply for "specific licenses."

Approval will be given case by case.

- A broader definition of who qualifies as family and can be visited.
- A per diem spending of \$179.

While advocates for liberalized travel to the island welcomed the news, they cautioned that it is still not what President Barack Obama promised on the campaign trail: no restrictions at all. But the White House hinted Thursday that more changes could come.

"The guidance issued yesterday by the Treasury Department was issued pursuant to a law passed by Congress," White House spokeswoman Gannet Tsegai said Thursday March 12.

"The president was not involved in the drafting of that provision, and it does not take the place of his own review of family visits and family cash remittances," she added.

Travel to Cuba became a thorny issue among Cuban-American politicians, who were largely divided along party lines. South Florida's Republican representatives have argued that increased travel to Cuba infuses the Castro regime with hard currency that helps keep it afloat.

The congressional spending bill passed this week also created a new general license for Americans who want to travel to Cuba to sell medical and agricultural goods to the Cuban government. That license will be formalized soon, Treasury spokeswoman Heather Wong said.

*Source: Miami Herald*

### Group quietly marks anniversary of Cuba crackdown

Cuba's Ladies in White decided to pray instead of protest for their imprisoned relatives Tuesday March 17 as they marked the sixth anniversary of a crackdown in which the government jailed 75 activists and independent journalists.

About 30 women squeezed into the apartment of founding member Laura Pollan and chanted Roman Catholic prayers in unison, even seeking protection for Fidel and Raul Castro while urging Cuba's leadership to respect human rights.

Fidel Castro was president in 2003, when authorities rounded up and accused dozens of people of plotting with Washington to undermine the communist government. Castro stepped aside in favour of his younger brother Raul last year.

Twenty prisoners have been released into forced exile or on medical parole, and the number of remaining inmates fell to 54 in January when a democracy activist completed his six-year sentence.

Pollan, whose husband, Hector Maseda, is serving a 20-year prison sentence, read a letter demanding that the rest should be freed. Their activities were "not considered criminal in any country that enjoys a true democracy,".

Last year, members of the group were detained for staging a sit-in near the Plaza of the Revolution, where Raul Castro keeps an office. To avoid confrontation this year, they read their letter to foreign reporters rather than deliver it to Cuban authorities.

The Ladies in White plan six days of protests this week, including sombre processions to different churches.

Cuba's government tolerates no organized opposition but allows the group to hold silent weekly marches.

Raul Castro has suggested that Cuban authorities could release the last 54 prisoners into forced exile if the U.S. frees five imprisoned Cuban spies.

*Sources: AP, Miami Herald*

### **Cuba says willing to discuss human rights with EU**

Cuba said on Wednesday March 18 it was willing to discuss human rights with the European Union as part of their renewed relationship, but indicated that talk about its prisons may not be any of Europe's business.

The EU and Cuba, which re-established cooperation, last year after a five-year rift over Cuban political prisoners, said they would meet in Brussels in May for political dialogue in another step toward normalizing relations.

The announcement was made at a joint appearance by new Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez and EU Development and Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel, who is visiting the Cuban capital.

The two met on the sixth anniversary of a government crackdown in which 75 dissidents and independent journalists were arrested and jailed on sentences ranging from six to 28 years.

The crackdown, which came to be known as Cuba's "black spring," caused the 27-nation EU to break off diplomatic relations with the communist-run island.

Michel, speaking through an interpreter, told reporters that Cuba was willing to discuss different issues including "the penitentiary system, an aspect that may be of as much interest to Cuba as to us."

Rodriguez, who replaced long time foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque in a recent cabinet shake-up, quickly corrected Michel. "Cuba is willing to continue the political dialogue with the EU on various topics, among them the field of human rights," he said.

"But we have not dealt with nor expressed any position about the penitentiary system because we consider that that belongs to the internal jurisdiction of the state," Rodriguez said. "It was possibly a misunderstanding I want to clear up."

The EU lifted the sanctions last June with the proviso that it would review Cuba's human rights situation annually. In October the EU and Cuba signed an agreement pledging new cooperation.

*Source: Reuters*

### **The Europe-Cuba NGO Network's Recommendations for the European Union Regarding its Policy towards Cuba**

In June 2009, the EU Council is scheduled to review its foreign policy towards Cuba once again, including whether or not it should keep the 1996 Common Position. Over the last year, the EU has lifted the suspended 2003 measures and normalized relations with the island in the hope that greater engagement would accelerate changes in Cuba. However, even if the dialogue has expanded to cover more topics, the conversation has largely stayed the same.

For the full version of the Europe Cuba NGO Network's recommendations visit this link: [http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset\\_cache/link/0000022016/090310\\_PolicyRecommendationsEUCuba.pdf](http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000022016/090310_PolicyRecommendationsEUCuba.pdf).

*Source: Europe – Cuba NGO Network*