

US embassy cable - 08HAVANA329

SPANISH NEWSPAPER REPORTS IMPENDING REFORM OF GOC TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

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SECSTATE FOR WHA A/S SHANNON, WHA/DAS MADISON, CUBA
TRANSITION COORDINATOR CALEB MCCARRY, WHA/CCA FOR BISA
WILLIAMS, D FOR MARY SUE CONAWAY FOR THE DEPUTY SECRETARY,
CA FOR A/S JACOBS, DRL FOR A/S KRAMER, P/DAS FARRAR.

DEPT OF COMMERCE FOR LINO GUTTIEREZ
NSC FOR DAN FISK AND MICHAEL KOZAK.

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SUBJECT: SPANISH NEWSPAPER REPORTS IMPENDING REFORM OF GOC
TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY: COM MICHAEL E. PARMLY FOR REASONS 1.4(B)
AND (D)

1. (SBU) Madrid-daily El Pais reported today that the GOC is about to announce a significant loosening of the travel restrictions that have essentially made it impossible for most Cubans to travel. According to the article, the "tarjeta blanca" or exit permission, would no longer be required for most travelers. Certain travelers, specifically doctors, recent university graduates who have not completed required periods of 'social service', and military and Ministry of Interior personnel with access to information "that affects the security of the State", would still be required to obtain permission to leave. Cubans would no longer be required to present a letter of invitation notarized by a Cuban consulate in order to travel. The authorized period that Cubans may remain abroad without impacting their ability to return would be raised from eleven to 24 months.

2. (SBU) The article was written by El Pais' long-time Havana-based correspondent Mauricio Vincent, who is generally considered among the very best, if not the best informed foreign correspondent in town. Vincent is well-known to USINT (he was a guest for dinner at the COMR earlier this week, where he showed an unnatural curiosity about migration matters) and has proven reliable in previous reports about impending 'changes' by Raul.

3. (S) We believe that some kind of liberalization of travel restrictions, roughly as described in the El Pais article, is on the way. Elimination of the 'tarjeta blanca' has been rumored for months, and has been publicly advocated by regime supporters such as First Daughter Mariela Castro and singer Silvio Rodriguez. It remains to be seen what this measure would mean for the travel of dissidents and other members of civil society. As reported in El Pais, the GOC would still reserve the right to require permission to travel from certain categories of people. Whether the government intends to allow dissidents and other members of civil society to leave and return to Cuba remains to be seen. Initial reaction to the El Pais report from USINT contacts among these groups has generally viewed this as unlikely.

4. (S) As has been the case with previous reforms introduced by Raul, the elimination of some travel restrictions would

not benefit all Cubans equally. Cubans with access to hard currency would be the prime beneficiaries. Prominent within this group are members of the nomenclature, notably those current and former military officers who have prospered in the past twenty years from the militarization of critical sectors of the economy and who now form the bulk of the upper echelons of Cuban managers in foreign firms. The significant percentage of the population with at least some access to remittances from family abroad would also potentially benefit. The majority of the Cuban people without access to hard currency would not have the financial means to take advantage of any loosening of travel restrictions.

5. (S) While most Cubans are too poor to contemplate foreign travel, the impact of a liberalization of travel restrictions should not be underestimated. The right to leave and return to one's own country is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and restrictions on the right to travel have figured prominently in criticisms of the regime, both on and off the island. Martha Beatriz Roque told USINT Human Rights Officer this morning that she would be meeting with Vladamiro Roca later today to discuss a possible response, should the measure be confirmed. Leading dissident Roberta de Miranda stated that he was sure that this was a cosmetic change, and that the GOC would still firmly control who stays and who leaves. He stated that the GOC would use the measure to entice dissidents to leave Cuba. Reaction among Cuban visitors to USINT's Consular Section this morning were generally positive, although some expressed caution about the details of the measure (for example, it was suggested that the GOC would raise fees on passports, medical exams, and other travel and migration-related services in order to compensate for the income lost with the elimination of the tarjeta blanca and the invitation letter, which cost the equivalent of \$150 each).

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6. (S) COMMENT. Liberalization of travel restrictions would represent major movement by Raul in one of the key potential areas of reform, others being the release of political prisoners, the holding of free and fair elections, recognition of property rights, and authorization to start independent small businesses. It would potentially represent a change of a magnitude far greater than the ability to buy a DVD or cell phone or spend the weekend in Varadero. The tone of the U.S. response will be important. We need not, and should not, express gratitude to the Cuban government for (finally) recognizing the right of the Cuban people to travel. Likewise, we should express our hope that the measure applies to all Cubans, including those who in the past have been denied the right to travel due to the peaceful

exercise of other rights recognized in the Universal Declaration, such as the right to free speech and assembly. We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that the measure will be broadly welcomed by the Cuban people. We should also bear in mind that movement on the travel front by the GOC will inevitably increase pressure on us within the international community to change our restrictions on travel to Cuba. We think that the liberalization of travel restrictions, if it occurs, would call for at least consideration by the U.S. government of modifying existing regulations concerning family visitation to the island.

7. (S) COMMENT CONTINUED: Liberalization of GOC travel restrictions could have significant impact on migration flows to the U.S. and on USINT consular operations; these will be discussed SEPTTEL.

PARMLY