

Press Releases: Background Briefing: State Department Official on Cuba

Special Briefing
State Department Official
Via Teleconference
October 3, 2017

MODERATOR: Good morning. And thanks, everyone, for joining us for our Cuba call. We're joined again this week by [State Department Official]. But I'd like to remind you that this call is on background. It will be attributable to a State Department official. This call will also be embargoed until 11 a.m. Eastern Time today. I know you're all anxious to get started, so with that, I'll turn it over to [State Department Official].

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you, [Moderator]. Good morning. This morning, the Department of State informed the Government of Cuba it was ordering the departure of 15 of its officials from its embassy in Washington, D.C. This move does not signal a change of policy or determination of responsibility for the attacks on U.S. Government personnel in Cuba. We are maintaining diplomatic relations with Havana. The decision on expulsions was taken due to Cuba's inability to protect our diplomats in Havana, as well as to ensure equity in the impact on our respective operations.

As you know, on September 29th, the department ordered the departure of nonemergency personnel assigned to the U.S. embassy in Havana, as well as all family members. Investigations into the attacks are ongoing, as investigators have been unable to determine who or what is causing these attacks.

Regarding the attacks, there are now 22 persons medically confirmed to have experienced health effects due to the attacks on diplomatic personnel in Havana. This information was confirmed yesterday after the decision-making process for the expulsions was well underway. The Cuban Government has told us it will continue its investigation into these attacks, and we will continue to cooperate that – with them in this effort. We will also continue our own investigations into these attacks.

With that, I'm ready to take your questions. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Okay. First question, please. And let's limit them to one question per reporter; we have a lot of people on the line. Thanks.

OPERATOR: Our first question comes from the line of Matt Spetalnick with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you very much. Just a couple of quick questions. What would it take in terms of Cuban action to return the U.S. diplomats to Cuba and to allow Cubans back – these 15 to return to the U.S.? Do you have an estimate of the percentage that these 15 make up of the Cuban diplomatic staff in the U.S.? And how much time are you giving the Cubans to leave?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We're giving the Cubans seven days for their personnel to depart. Are we doing more than one question? Should I ask the last one or the first one?

MODERATOR: Go ahead. Just – keep them tight, please.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: With regard to what it will take to restore operations, we have underscored repeatedly to the Cuban Government its responsibility for the safety, well-being, security, and protection of our diplomatic staff under the Vienna Convention in Havana. We will need full assurances from the Cuban Government that these attacks will not continue before we can even contemplate returning personnel.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Josh Lederman with AP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey. Thanks for doing this. Two quick ones: One, can you say what the specific diplomatic action that you're taking are? Are you PNGing these people? Are you asking the Cubans to pull them, and if they don't pull them then you will PNG them? How precisely is that going to work? And then just second, on this thing, you're talking about needing full assurances from the Cuban Government. That presupposes that you think the Cuban Government has the ability to put a stop to this if they wanted to. Can you explain – can you square how you're saying you don't know who or what is causing this, yet you believe it is within Cuba's ability to stop it? Thank you.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No. Our position on assurances does not presume Cuban culpability. What it does is require the Cuban Government to be able to fulfill its treaty obligations for the safety, well-being, and protection of foreign diplomats in their country. And until they can give that assurance, our personnel, we have judged, are not safe and secure in the country.

We are expelling the 15 Cubans today. They are not being declared persona non grata. And we expect them to leave within seven days.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We go to Rich Edson, Fox News Channel. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Good morning, guys. The latest attack was still in August – can you confirm that? Are all the U.S. diplomats who are required to leave Havana and Cuba, have they left? And just a bit on – follow up on what Josh was asking. If these attacks just stop and it's six months, a year down the road, there's no determination, would then the United States consider increasing its diplomatic presence in Cuba?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Rich, I'm not going to talk about hypothetical conditions or timeframes. It just – it's just not productive at this point. The first question was, again?

QUESTION: (Inaudible) saying are medically affected. Was the latest attack still in August? And are – the U.S. diplomats leaving Cuba, are they all gone?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Yeah. So we are in the process of the ordered departure of our staff. It will take us a few days to get everyone out. But we expect everyone to be out by the end of the week. We have given the Cuban Government seven days to depart.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*, go ahead.

QUESTION: Can you clarify if the 22nd person affected – you mentioned was in August or September. And is the 22 just American government personnel, or does this include any dependents or family members, and have they been affected?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The 22nd person was – yeah – was a person who suffered an attack in January of this year and who was subsequently re-evaluated based on symptoms and conditions the person was experiencing.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Michelle Kosinski with CNN, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. So if you don't know what caused it, who did it, and the symptoms are different among victims, how do you know it's an attack? Why are you calling it an attack? And to go back to a previous question someone had asked, asked what percentage this represents of the staff at the Cuban Embassy. Thank you.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The attacks reflect an ongoing series of incidents that are affecting our diplomatic personnel, and they have persisted over a long period of time now that has made it very clear that our people are suffering and are suffering these attacks from some unknown means and method. And the decision to call them attacks reflects that there's been a consistent pattern of our people being affected, and there's no other conclusion that we could draw.

I think the issue with regard to the number of Cubans departing is that it ensures that we have equitable staffing levels to allow our embassies to operate. I'm not going to get into the specifics of what the specific percentage is. I don't know that we have a specific figure.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: We go to Carol Morello with *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. Like many other reporters here, I've been getting phone calls from people, including physicians, speculating on what the causes were. A couple of physicians have suggested there might be some degree of psychosomatic mass hysteria going on. I was wondering if you've ruled that out.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Again, I'm not a medical professional. I know that the medical teams are looking at all of the symptoms and are considering all of the possibilities. But they have been able to confirm the symptoms that we've previously described are occurring and our people are demonstrating physical symptoms.

MODERATOR: And next question, please.

OPERATOR: Michele Kelemen with NPR, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah. Hi. Do you have specific names of Cubans who you want – who you're expelling? Or are you leaving that decision up to the Cuban Government on how they should downsize?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I spoke with the Cuban ambassador this morning at 9 o'clock. We provided a diplomatic note that did provide a list of Cubans. He had some questions as to how this might affect their embassy operations, but yes, we did give them a list.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: We go to David Adams with Univision. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Is it true that the Cubans, Bruno Rodriguez, told Secretary of State Tillerson the other day that the Cubans are aware that this was a rogue operation by people inside Cuba, inside its own government services?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going to comment on diplomatic conversations. I would refer you to the Secretary's readout that we issued.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

QUESTION: Hernan Martin with EFE News Service, please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, this is actually Lucia Leal. I wanted to see if you – if the possibility of closing the U.S. embassy in Cuba is out of the table now. And these announcements have come in waves. Why not announce this on Friday, last Friday? Thank you.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I want to – I want to reiterate what I said in my earlier statement. This does not signal a change of policy or a determination of responsibility for the attacks. We are maintaining diplomatic relations with Cuba at this time.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And we'll go to Nora Gamez with *Miami Herald*.

QUESTION: Hi. After this measure, the Cuban embassy will probably also cut its consular services and the family reunification program and visas in Havana are suspended, so family reunification would be severely impacted. What's the message to Cuban Americans that will not be able to see their families because of this crisis?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think we are evaluating the impact our reduction of staff will have on those issues, but the Secretary has made clear first and foremost is the safety, security, and well-being of our diplomatic personnel overseas. There will be emergency services that will remain available.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next is Francesco Fontemaggi with AFP. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. Just a quick follow-up on a previous question. Why didn't you announce your decision last Friday when you announced the recall of your diplomats? Because don't you feel that this will be taken as an escalation by Cuba if there are more steps and more steps? Thank you.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think this reflects a deliberate process to work through the issues related to this incident. I think first and foremost the Secretary wanted to focus on the safety and well-being of our personnel. Once having made that decision, we then moved on to consider ensuring that there would be an equitable impact in our two embassies' ability to operate.

OPERATOR: And next we go to Tracy Wilkinson with *Los Angeles Times*. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. Hi, [State Department Official]. You said you gave a list of your 15 names to the Cubans. Could you describe generically who these people are? Are these political officers, security officers, anything like that? And you said you didn't want to give a percentage, but if the U.S. is bringing back, what, half of its staff, was this half of the Cuban staff?

And finally, just the same question that everyone has asked is it's hard to square expelling Cubans with not blaming the Cubans for these attacks. Thanks.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So again, the – we provided a list of personnel across the Cuban embassy to reflect the fact that we are only leaving emergency personnel in Havana to ensure that both embassy – there's an equitable impact on both embassies' operations. I think the percentages are very – roughly very close to each other. And then finally, again, we're not assigning culpability. This is to ensure that there's an equitable impact on our embassies' ability to operate and to underscore to the Cubans that they must take more action to protect our people on the ground if we're going to have a full range of embassy operations in both capitals.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Gardiner Harris with *New York Times*. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm just going to try again that other people have tried – you all said in the Russia tit-for-tat this specific number of embassy personnel and consulate personnel that would be allowed by both countries. Is it that Cuba is now going to be down to 27 people in the United States just like the United States is down to 27 people in Havana? Thanks.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: First, the Russia situation is very distinct from this situation. This is related to the safety and security and well-being of our embassy. We made a decision to move to ordered departure to ensure that only emergency personnel in Havana would remain, and I'm just not going to comment on the exact numbers that will remain in either post.

MODERATOR: Okay. (Inaudible) please.

OPERATOR: Conor Finnegan with ABC News.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. I just want to jump back to something you said in response to Tracy's question. You said the Cubans must take more action. What specifically are you asking them to do if you don't still know what the cause of these incidents are? Thank you.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Again, I think the conversations focus on the Cuban Government's responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of diplomatic personnel that they host in their country. It's not for us to outline a set of criteria for them to ensure that environment. But we are making it clear that the safety and well-being of our people is being affected by these health attacks and we can no longer expose them to the environment down there.

QUESTION: Okay.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: It's Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. My question is whether you have any indications this is happening in any other embassies either in the region or around the world, or if you're taking steps to ensure that doesn't happen.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. I'm [State Department Official]. I am not aware of any other incidents in our region that have been reported to us. I can't comment globally.

MODERATOR: Okay. And –

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I just don't know.

MODERATOR: And final question, please.

OPERATOR: Steve Dorsey with CBS News Radio.

QUESTION: Hi, good morning. Can you tell us whether any posts from Cuban diplomats besides Washington and the United States are being affected by this

move? And just quickly, Scott Hamilton, the head of the U.S. mission to Cuba, in a farewell message said he and his family are leaving this week from Cuba. Who has the State Department placed in charge of the U.S. mission to Cuba?

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: At this point, Scott Hamilton remains the charge. I don't have any announcement on whether he's departing or who would be replacing him.

MODERATOR: Okay. We thank you for joining us. We sure appreciate it. The call is embargoed until 11:00 a.m. Eastern Time today and [State Department Official] will be named, please, as a State Department official. Thank you. We'll see you later today.

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