

Biden Will Remove Cuba From List of State Sponsors of Terrorism

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**By Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Frances Robles
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President Biden will remove Cuba from a list of state sponsors of terrorism, U.S. officials announced on Tuesday, as a part of a deal that is expected to free protesters jailed during a sweeping 2021 crackdown on dissent by the Communist government.

Removing Cuba from the list would typically raise expectations of improved relations between Washington and Havana and renewed hope for economic investment in Cuba.

But Mr. Biden's decision is only the latest in a series of conflicting U.S. approaches to Cuba by different administrations. The Obama administration made the decision to remove the terrorism designation for Cuba as part of a broader effort to normalize relations with the nation. But days before President Donald J. Trump left office in 2021, his administration placed Cuba back on the list.

Mr. Biden's decision honored the "wisdom and counsel that has been provided to him by many world leaders, especially in Latin America, who have encouraged him to take these actions, on how best to advance the human rights of the Cuban people," according to a statement from the White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre.

Mr. Trump's pick to be secretary of state in his new term, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, is likely to oppose Mr. Biden's 11th-hour actions on Cuba. Mr. Rubio's family fled the island for the United States before Fidel Castro's revolution seized power in 1959, and he has long been one of the Republican Party's leading advocates for a hard-line stance against Cuba.

[Mauricio Claver-Carone](#), who was recently named Mr. Trump's envoy for Latin America, scoffed at the announcement. "Whether Venezuela last year or now Cuba, the Biden administration seems to love fake deals that favor authoritarian anti-American regimes," he said, referring to a 2023 prisoner swap with Venezuela.

Asked whether the Trump administration would immediately repeal the decision, he said, "There's a process, so it will take time, but in the meantime we can take other measures that will have even greater impact."

The decision by Mr. Biden is the latest in a number of [environmental](#), [immigration](#) and [foreign policy actions](#) taken in the final weeks of his presidency before Mr. Trump returns to the White House.

If upheld, Mr. Biden's move could help Cuba's battered economy. Being placed on a terrorism list opens up a nation to economic penalties, including a restriction on accessing U.S. aid and a ban on defense exports and sales, [according to the State Department](#). Major banks stopped doing business with Cuba because it was too much trouble to make sure that the country satisfied all the requirements to legally do business there. Still, even without the terrorist designation, Cuba would still need to contend with the trade embargo imposed by the United States.

John S. Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a business group, said American companies would not make any changes to their stance on Cuba, because they know the fragility of the relationship between the two nations. He said the move would probably be reversed as soon as Mr. Rubio "hands President Trump a pen."

"Any quid obtained by the Biden-Harris administration is not worth the quo," he said.

Removing Cuba from the list leaves only North Korea, Iran and Syria on it.

The Biden administration's announcement included measures that would ease economic penalties against Cuba. U.S. officials said they would waive a provision of a 1996 law that allowed people to file lawsuits in U.S. courts over property expropriated by the Cuban government. The Biden administration will also lift a Trump-era national security memorandum that imposed sanctions on Cuban military entities — which oversee the hotel industry — and made it difficult for U.S. tour operators to bring in large groups.

The U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity to preview Mr. Biden's decision, said the United States was taking the action as part of an effort, pushed by the Catholic Church, to free political prisoners.

Hundreds of protesters were detained in July 2021 in a brutal crackdown following one of the largest demonstrations in Cuba since the Communist government took power roughly six decades earlier. The demonstrators were angry over the nation's lack of freedom and severe economic decline.

Human rights groups say that some of those arrested during and after the protests have [been tortured and that many have been sentenced to long prison terms after unfair trials](#). There are about 1,000 political prisoners serving time in Cuba, and about half of their cases were related to the July 2021 protest, human rights groups said.

[In a statement](#), Cuba's Foreign Ministry said President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez had made the decision to "gradually" release 553 people "who had been convicted, in accordance with the due process, for several crimes that are punishable by law" after

meeting with Pope Francis. The move was made in recognition of the Catholic Church Jubilee, a special year of mercy and forgiveness.

Alejandro González Raga, a dissident who was released in a 2008 accord and sent to Spain, stressed that at least four of Cuba's main opposition leaders also remained imprisoned, and that they and all remaining political prisoners should be released without any conditions or being forced into exile.

But some in Cuba expressed doubt over the prospect.

"I'll believe it when I see it," said Eloy Pedroso, whose son, also called Eloy, was condemned to five years in prison after he appeared on national television at age 18 throwing stones at the police.

In a social media post, Mr. Díaz-Canel thanked all those who had contributed to the decision to remove Cuba from a list he said it should never have been on, which "has a high cost for Cuban families."

"We will continue to confront and denounce the economic war and the actions of interference, disinformation and discredit financed with U.S. federal funds," he said.

Many experts have long criticized Cuba's inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, and blamed that status for causing a dire financial situation that spurred a humanitarian and migration crisis on the island. The Cuban government has struggled in recent months to keep electricity running and stores stocked.

"The statute that creates the terrorism list specifies giving material support to terrorists or harboring terrorists who are actively engaged in terrorism while you are harboring them," said William M. LeoGrande, a Cuba expert at American University. "Cuba just hasn't done those things."

Several U.S. fugitives do reside in Cuba, but they should not count, because they are Americans who had been involved in politically motivated violence in the United States, not international terrorists, Mr. LeoGrande said.

[Another reason cited](#) for keeping Cuba on the list was its refusal to extradite members of a Colombian rebel group, the National Liberation Army, also known as the E.L.N. The rebels received safe passage to Cuba to participate in peace talks, which later broke down. But the president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, recently asked the Biden administration to remove Cuba from the list, which was one of the key factors that motivated the Biden administration, according to a U.S. official.

Juan Pappier, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Americas division, said Mr. Biden's move came too late.

"Biden made a mistake of putting Cuba in the back seat and failing to overturn the pernicious policies of the Trump administration," Mr. Pappier said.

He said Mr. Biden delayed the decision out of fear of alienating voters in Florida ahead of the U.S. presidential election.

Migdalia Gutiérrez's son, Brusnelvis Cabrera Gutiérrez, was sentenced to 10 years for sedition at age 20 for throwing stones, a charge he denies.

"It's the best that could happen. It's brilliant!" she said of the anticipated prisoner release. "I want him liberated. I have hope. How am I not going to have hope?"

Ed Augustin contributed reporting from Havana.