

Representative Ray LaHood (Illinois 18th Congressional District)

Statement Before the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee

U.S.-Cuba Travel Restrictions

Washington, DC

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Cuban travel ban.

For over 40 years, it has been illegal for U.S. citizens to travel to the island of Cuba. The penalty for not abiding by these restrictions often results in paying a hefty fine of over \$7,000.

Travel restrictions were put into place over several years with new restrictions being added piece by piece. The first restrictions put into place back in 1960 restricted most exports to Cuba. In 1962, President Kennedy banned travel by prohibiting transactions with Cuba. While travel was temporarily permitted during the Carter administration, the travel ban and other prohibitions were renewed in 1982. Then, in 1994, the Clinton administration added more restrictions on family travel, prohibiting family from visiting without being granted a license to travel for the purposes of extreme family hardship involving humanitarian need. Today, Cuban-Americans are only able to visit Cuba once every three years for no more than 14 days, and they are only able to visit immediate family members.

Just as these restrictions were put into place piece by piece, they can be removed in a similar manner. Allowing family travel restrictions to be eased or removed is the first and most important step in this process.

As a member of the Cuba Working Group, I have continuously supported measures introduced in Congress to limit the restrictions on travel to Cuba. America's support for democracy in Latin America, a region that is now more democratic than at any time in history, has been augmented over time by close person-to-person contact and exchanges. The one exception to democracy in the region is Cuba, where the United States continues to maintain a policy of isolation. By lifting the current restrictions, many U.S. citizens could travel to Cuba and engage in conversations with the people of Cuba. This would undermine the Cuban government's strict control and manipulation of information and, in effect, weaken totalitarian control over Cuba, as American ideas and values could finally penetrate the Cuban borders.

If the ultimate goal is to promote democracy, public participation in government, and freedom of speech and expression, how is it beneficial to prevent Cuban citizens from being exposed to American citizens who hold such beliefs and ideals? Family members, Cuban-American citizens, who are culturally tied to both the United States and Cuba would be the best emissaries to achieve this goal; to help the country incorporate democracy into its political landscape while also preserving its ethnic identity.

When I came to Congress 13 years ago, there was a travel ban for people to travel to Lebanon, and I worked very hard with the Clinton administration to get that ban lifted. It has been lifted, and look at the kind of relationship we have with Lebanon now. There are vast differences in our political and social interaction with Lebanon from the time the ban was lifted in July 1997 to today. Business investment in Lebanon has increased. While conflicts with Hezbollah remain a significant factor in Lebanese politics, the overall democratic institutions are solid. Interactions between our United States Congress and the Lebanese Parliament are also strong.

I understand the arguments of those who oppose lifting the travel ban to Cuba. There is concern that additional tourism dollars resulting from increased travel to Cuba could promote the very regime that is oppressing Cuban citizens. However, in our attempts to subvert oppression, we are contributing to the problem. We are punishing those we are intending to help by keeping this ban in place. Families are being torn apart and limited in their ability to assist each other in times of need. The occurrences are not a direct result of the Cuban government, but of our own.

This policy, which aims to deny hard currency earnings to the Cuban government, may have made sense when Cuba and the Soviet Union were threatening countries in this hemisphere, but it makes no sense today when Cuba poses no significant national security threat, and many Cold War travel restrictions to other parts of the world have already been abolished. When you have a country 90 miles off our border, we ought to have a strong relationship with them, whether we like or dislike, agree or disagree with the government there. There are many governments that we disagree with politically, but we allow people to come back and forth, and we allow people to have the opportunity to be with their families.

Removing the travel ban to Cuba is a policy decision that would be a benefit to our country. Travel, and person-to-person interactions will increase positive relations between our nations. This course of action will allow many of our own citizens to travel to see family without (or with limited) restrictions. If we do not have communication with the people of Cuba and we do not allow families to travel back and forth and to have the interaction with one another, we are never going to bridge this gap. The way you bridge it is to allow this kind of travel and opportunities for family, and at that point, then, I think we will have taken a significant step in the right direction.

Thank you once again for allowing me to address this important matter.