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February 28, 2018

The Honorable Rex Tillerson  
Secretary  
United States Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20520

RE: Urge Restoration of U.S. Embassy in Cuba Consular Services, End to Overarching Travel Warning and Increased American Diplomatic Presence

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

I returned from a congressional delegation trip to Cuba last week where we met with the new U.S. Ambassador Phillip Goldberg and the skeleton staff at the U.S. Embassy. I am very concerned with the almost complete absence of personnel at the U.S. Embassy, especially in consular services, and with the related detrimental impact on families, educational, religious and cultural exchanges between the Cuban people and the American people. It also is troubling that the United States currently lacks a strong diplomatic presence in Cuba. It is a time of great change in Cuba, and America should be there promoting economic and human rights reforms and continued cooperative dialogue. I urge you to return consular officials and diplomatic personnel to the embassy as soon as possible. While I appreciate your overriding concern with the health and safety of our diplomats following the unexplained health incidents, it is time to increase staffing and reestablish an American presence to serve our interests and our citizens. I understand that the State Department must determine a course of action regarding the status of our embassy by March 4. I believe that you can work to ensure the health and safety of the U.S. officials while returning to full strength in our diplomatic and consular efforts.

The transfer of consular services from Havana to Bogota, Colombia and other countries has added unnecessary time and expense to U.S. and Cuban families and their ability to maintain contact and travel to the U.S. It simply is unreasonable and unaffordable for the U.S. to require someone to travel to another country for an interview in order to receive permission to visit family in Tampa, Miami or anywhere in the U.S. For the first eight months of 2017, an average of 1100 non-immigrant visas were granted per month. That number dropped significantly to around 350 per month after consular services were essentially discontinued last October. This includes family members who simply would like to attend a wedding or a birthday or other family event, or receive medical care.

The current Administration policy also has thrown a wrench into the agreement between our countries that requires the U.S. to accept at least 20,000 Cuban immigrants every year. Prior to the removal of embassy personnel last fall, immigrant visas averaged approximately 800 per month. Since that time, there has been a sharp decline. No one expects the U.S. to reach its commitment this year. I am concerned that refugees, asylum seekers and family who would like to be reunited are caught in this intractable and harsh set of circumstances. I urge you to remedy the situation as soon as possible and uphold the U.S. commitment.

It is also time to reverse the overreaching travel warning by the State Department that it is unsafe to travel to Cuba and to remove the restriction on American visitors that they can only participate in people-to-people travel to Cuba with a tour guide. There is nothing in recent history to show that Cuba is unsafe for American visitors and travel restrictions serve no purpose. People-to-people exchanges have ground to halt as I have heard from many religious, cultural and educational interests whose plans have been canceled or put on hold. This is counterproductive and complicates America's ability to support everyday Cubans and promote the exchange of ideas.

I also heard directly from many everyday Cubans regarding the negative effects that changes in policy by the Trump Administration have had on the support for the Cuban people and the private sector on the island. The overbroad travel warning and other travel restrictions imposed on American travelers by the Administration have hurt many *cuentapropistas* and *paladares* and everyday Cubans. Unfortunately it appears that our current policies are working counter to their stated goals. Instead of supporting individual business owners in Cuba, this Administration is empowering those in the Cuban government that wish to suppress the growing private sector.

Finally, it appears that Cuba remains on track for a historic change in the President of the country from Raul Castro to Miguel Diaz-Canal in April. It would be in America's interest to be engaged and continue to build on the 22 agreements relating to law enforcement, drug interdiction, human trafficking, hurricane preparedness, environmental cooperation, and more. We must not lose sight of the fact that an improved and sustained relationship with Cuba brings us one step closer to ensuring the stability and security of the entire Western Hemisphere. After all, Cuba is our neighbor only 90 miles away from the coast of Florida.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns and recommendations. I would appreciate a response at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me, or my Deputy Chief of Staff Lara Hopkins, at 202-225-3376.

Sincerely,



Kathy Castor  
U.S. Representative  
Florida- District 14