

## **The US blockade of Cuba**

Cuba is a small Latin American Caribbean state with a population of 11 million. In terms of its resources, it could be said to be at a disadvantage compared with those found in some other countries in the region, such as Venezuela with its extensive oil reserves. However, any disadvantage that it may suffer in relation to its resources is far outweighed by that imposed by its neighbour, the United States, situated a mere 90 miles from its shores.

Since 1962 the US has imposed a full economic blockade against the island in an attempt to increase artificially the levels of poverty, hunger and disease. By so doing they hope to foment dissatisfaction and dissent among Cubans against their socialist government. At the same time illegal emigration is encouraged by the Cuban Adjustment Act, passed in November 1966 which ensures, exclusively for Cubans who arrive on US soil illegally, special guarantees and rights, including the rights to benefits and residence in the US.

Through these measures the US aims to bring about 'regime change' with a view to re-imposing that country's apparatus of control and political interference that existed before the socialist revolution in 1959. Their objective is to bring Cuba in line with other countries in the developing world which have found themselves obliged to follow neo-liberal recipes for managing their economies. Such measures have been to the benefit of the large multinational companies, but the consequences for the great majority of those countries' populations have been increasing poverty and social injustice.

A prominent group in the thrust to overthrow the Cuban revolution are the wealthy Cubans who left for Miami in 1959. For this minority, as well as for a handful of large US companies and the Mafia, Cuba was a source of sugar and cattle in addition to being a playground for wealthy Americans who visited the island for its casinos and brothels. Meanwhile the majority of the Cuban population lived in abject poverty.

Today nearly 70% of the Cuban population was born after 1959 and 60% have lived all their lives under the regime of unilateral sanctions. Cuba is the only country off limits to US citizens by law.

### US measures taken against Cuba since 1959

The revolutionary government took power in 1959, with its policy of freeing the impoverished population from the economic and political domination of the US and of a few wealthy Cuban families. Its aim was to achieve an equal distribution of the country's wealth together with opportunities of advancement for all the population. Since that year the country has been subject to increasingly severe interference on the part of the US, who objected to the reforms put in place. Reprisals have included attacks, trade restrictions and prohibitions and incitement to subversion.

## Time Line of the US Blockade

- 1959-60: The reaction of the US to agrarian reform and the re-distribution of land during the first year of the revolutionary government is to send military air-craft to bomb sugar mills, sugar cane fields and oil refineries. Raids are also carried out in Havana, Matanzas, Pinar del Río, Las Villas, Camaguey and in other provinces. A train is strafed and a French freighter, the Coubre is blown up leaving over one hundred people dead.
- 17 March 1960: President Eisenhower approves Operation Pluto, a covert action plan actively to overthrow the Cuban government. The plan calls for a termination of all sugar trade with Cuba, the end of all oil deliveries to Cuba and a continuation of the arms embargo (initiated in October 1959).
- US companies in Cuba are ordered not to refine oil. US oil sales to Cuba are terminated.
- July 1960: The US suspends trading sugar with Cuba, thus cutting off over 80% of Cuban exports to the United States.
- 19 October 1960: The US imposes an economic blockade on Cuba covering all trade, except food and medicine.
- 1961: Following the defeat of CIA-trained mercenaries in the Bay of Pigs invasion in April, the US retaliate by banning aid, formally cutting off all sugar imports and allowing only limited tourist access to the island. US companies cannot sell oil to Cuba and are instructed not to refine oil imported to Cuba from the USSR.
- 3 February 1962: President Kennedy makes the blockade official, forbidding any purchases from Cuba. In addition exports to Cuba of products of US origin through third countries are prohibited, as are those products made in countries outside the US if the companies are partly owned by US citizens or corporations. Ships transporting goods to Cuba are denied access to US ports and US citizens are prohibited from travelling to the island. Rationing is introduced on the island in May 1962.
- (1962: October Missile Crisis)
- 1964: At the behest of the US, the Latin American countries who are members of the Organisation of American States close their markets and diplomatic links with Cuba, with the exception of Mexico. It is at this point that Cuba starts to trade extensively with the USSR, other European socialist countries and the People's Republic of China.
- In the seventies there is a slight slackening of the blockade under the presidency of President Carter:
  - Foreign subsidiaries of US companies are permitted to sell products in Cuba. - Other nations are no longer penalised for trading with Cuba (1975); (1975);

- The bans on travel to Cuba and on US citizens spending dollars in Cuba are dropped (1977).
- (1975: in July the Organisation of American States votes to end political and economic sanctions against Cuba.)
- In the eighties the blockade is tightened again during the presidency of Ronald Reagan:
  - The travel restrictions for US citizens and curbs on spending money in Cuba are reestablished. The use of credit cards is banned in connection with travel to Cuba. Those US citizens or foreigners who are permitted to visit Cuba are allowed to spend just \$100.
  - In 1985 travel to the US from Cuba is banned for large sections of the Cuban population (apart from those immigrants arriving illegally).
  - Trade restrictions are tightened still further and vessels calling at Cuban ports are again banned from entering US ports. There is a crackdown on companies based in Panama identified by the US as 'Cuban front companies'.
  - Radio Martí - a propaganda channel broadcast illegally from the US to Cuba - is Inaugurated.
  - Publications without licenses coming from Cuba are retained by the US authorities. Only one copy per person is allowed of any publication from Cuba.
- In the early nineties, at the same time as losing 85% of her trade after the break up of the USSR and the other countries in Eastern Europe, Cuba suffers further trade restrictions because of the Torricelli Act (Cuban Democracy Act), passed in 1992. This act designed, in the words of Congressman Robert Torricelli, to "wreak havoc on the island", extends the blockade to countries outside the US:
  - It prohibits any form of business transaction between US firms and Cuba, including through third countries. Before the introduction of this act Cuba acquired vital goods from branches of US companies based in countries outside the US. 70% of this trade was for food and medicine. Many people claim that the act is in violation of international law and United Nations' resolutions which state that food and medicine cannot be used as weapons in international conflicts.
  - A ban is imposed on maritime navigation to and from Cuba. Any ship touching a Cuban port or which transports goods to or on behalf of Cuba is prohibited from entering US ports for 180 days. This condition violates the norms of freedom of trade and navigation enshrined in international law.

As a consequence of the Torricelli Act, which cut all trade and technological links with the US, Cuba has to seek further afield for new sources of supplies and markets for exports. The country therefore incurs much greater transportation and freight costs which in turn aggravate its economic crisis.

- As the peso is not recognised as a world currency, in 1994 Cuba introduces dollarisation in order to be able to pay for imported goods. The country is prevented from access to financial credits, meaning that all purchases have to be made in cash
- The Helms-Burton Act of 1996 not only legalises all the prohibitions of the blockade but also calls for a more active interference in the internal functioning of the country to bring about destabilisation and promote regime change. It also extends its remit to any transaction or business enterprise that may benefit the Cuban economy. This act calls for the submission of yearly reports on all aid, trade and ventures between Cuba and other countries, firms or individuals. This act ratchets up the measures taken to destabilise and promote subversion on the island:
  - External radio and TV broadcasts are stepped up, with a corresponding escalation of the propaganda war, illegally using channels assigned to Cuban TV stations and registered with the International Telecommunications Union. In 2003 approximately \$25.3 million was spend to transmit propaganda to Cuba through Radio Martí and TV Martí.
  - US propaganda and incitement to subversion inside the country is intensified through the distribution of leaflets and the creation of special 'libraries', funded and resourced by the US through its Interests Section in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The aim is to foment civil disobedience, leading to regime change.
  - Officials and executives of foreign companies that trade with Cuba are denied entry to the US. The actions of such companies that have been condemned by the US include the leasing of aircraft, the delivery of baby food containers, cashing cheques from subsidiaries of US banks and and shipments of fruit juice. In this context the Helms-Burton Act is in contempt of international law which upholds a third country's sovereign right to trade in its own legitimate interests. In 2005 over 200 British tourists with holidays booked in Cuba have their plans cancelled when the travel agencies they have used – Ebookers, Octopus and Travelbag – are bought up by the American company Cendant.
- During the 1990s, in keeping with its policy of internal interference, the US refuses to prevent illegal incursions from its own territory into Cuban airspace by aircraft flown by Cuban emigré groups in order to create radio interference. These groups also perpetrate acts of violence against the island.
- In 2000 the Trades Sanctions Reform Act allows some food sales to Cuba from the US.
- In July 2004 a report is published by the so-called Commission for Assistance to a 'Free Cuba' which calls for a more aggressive policy to ensure regime change in Cuba. This report defines extensively the state, the economic, political and social structures and legal system with which the US intends to replace the present system on the island. All branches of the economy will be privatised, subsidies and price controls for essential items will be abolished and health and education will once

again be in private hands. The social security system will be dismantled and pensions will not be respected. Following the recommendations of this report George Bush Jnr. introduces further measures:

- Bilateral exchanges for academic, sporting, scientific and cultural events are severely curtailed. In October 2004, 64 Cuban university professors are denied a visa to attend a conference in Las Vegas of the Latin American Studies Association.
  - Cuban-born citizens living in the US are now only able to visit the island once every three years for 14 days and then only to see immediate relatives. No exceptions are permitted in special circumstances. Their daily spending allowance is limited to \$54 and they are allowed just \$50 for transportation on the island.
  - Remittances sent to family members from relatives in the US are cut.
  - Anti-Cuba campaigns are funded in selected third countries to discourage tourists.
  - The US government commits itself to spending \$59million over the next two years in the form of grants to groups hostile to the Cuban government and to finance subversive activities on the island (in violation of international law) as well as world-wide campaigns to discredit the country. According to an article in *Newsday Magazine*, in 2003 (before the publication of the report) \$32,3 million was spent to fund so-called 'pro-democracy' activities in Cuba. Another \$18 was found for the use of military aircraft such as C-130 COMMANDO planes to enhance broadcasts by US government-run propaganda stations.
- May 2004: United Swiss Banks is fined \$100 million by the US for trading in dollars supplied by Cuba (together with pre-war Iraq and Iran). Although about \$3 billion is received from tourism and remittances from abroad, Cuba is not allowed by the US government to purchase goods on the world market in dollars. It has to change dollars to other currencies, incurring costs of several hundred million dollars as the US tries to stop these bank transactions. Finally, in December of the same year, in Cuba replaces the US dollar by the convertible peso which tourists can buy by exchanging euros, pounds sterling, Canadian dollars or Swiss francs.
- February 2005: The US announces that Cuba will have to pay in cash in advance of shipment for US food purchases, such as rice, corn, wheat and chicken, rather than on receipt of these items.

## **The blockade and the United Nations**

Every year since 1992 there has been a resolution presented to the UN that the US should end the blockade against Cuba. Each year an overwhelming majority of member states votes against the blockade, with just the US, Israel and sometimes a third or fourth country voting in favour of its retention. Nevertheless on account of its right to veto, the US persists with its cruel and destructive policy. Below are the yearly voting figures:

Vote	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
In favour	59	88	101	117	137	143	157	155
Against	3	4	2	3	3	3	2	2

Vote	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
In favour	167	167	173	179	179	179
Against	3	3	3	3	4	4

## **The consequences of the blockade for Cuba**

By 2004 it was calculated that the total direct damage to the Cuban economy caused by the blockade had amounted to approximately \$80 billion.

The US blockade has affected virtually every aspect of life in Cuba. Some of the facts contained in Cuba's report to the UN, produced in July 2003 are listed below:

### ➤ Exports, imports and Services:

- Cuba purchases goods at higher prices than in normal conditions and incurs higher transportation and freight costs. As shown above, the island experiences unfavourable trading conditions. Furthermore extra costs are incurred on account of Cuba's inability to purchase certain goods. For instance, the island has to lease aircraft rather than purchase them on account of the US monopoly of certain component parts.
- Exports are also affected by the higher costs of freight and goods are paid for in different foreign currencies through intermediaries, incurring a loss of money through exchange rates and insurance costs. Intermediaries are also used to place products, such as nickel, on the world market.

### ➤ Health

- In the health service the blockade has created serious shortages of medicines, often leading to fatalities. Diagnostic kits and equipment (together with replacement parts) needed to treat the sick are also in short supply. 70% of companies that manufacture equipment and reagents for diagnostic purposes are US owned, as are the majority of pharmaceutical companies. Sometimes alternative medicines and treatment are not found or have to be imported from other parts of the world at far higher prices.
- Public health has also been affected. For instance, the blockade has made it difficult to find replacement parts for water chlorination equipment.

➤ The food supply

- The blockade has affected the food supply and the nutritional levels of the population and rationing, introduced in 1962, continues to be in force. In 2003 Cuba paid an extra \$22.4 million on freight to import food from countries that are situated far away from the island – money that could have been spent on food.
- In agriculture, the blockade has caused problems in obtaining spare parts for farming equipment as well as pesticides, fertilizers and veterinary equipment and medicines. The export of agricultural produce, such as tropical and citrus fruits and their derivatives, is curtailed by the island's inability to export freely.

➤ Education

In education, Cuba's ability to buy equipment and stationery has decreased by between 25-30% since the early 90s. Only about 50% of books and reference materials are being printed. The island pays \$1,000 instead of \$700 for each Braille machine to be used by the visually impaired. Again, excessive freight costs to import materials from Asian countries detract from Cuba's ability to provide its schoolchildren and students with the materials they need.

➤ Cultural life

- Cuba has no access to the US market for cultural goods or the acquisition of necessary resources for training and creative activities, such as ballet shoes, theatre set design and art materials.
- Works by Cuban writers living on the island are not published in the US; the copyrights and royalties of Cuban artists and writers are frozen in US banks.
- Cuban artists cannot perform in the US for commercial ends. US/Cuban film co-productions are prohibited.
- Academic, scientific, cultural and sporting exchanges have been cut back extensively. Visas are frequently denied to Cuban scientists, diplomats and officials who apply to attend events such as book fairs and international conferences, including those organised by the United Nations. Even those Cubans who have been nominated for Grammy Awards have been refused permission to enter the US.
- US citizens travelling to Cuba risk a 10-year prison sentence and fines of up to \$250,000 for individuals and \$1 million for corporations. The American guitarist, Ry Cooder, one of the individuals responsible for the success of the 'Buena Vista Social Club' was prohibited from continuing to work with Cuban musicians on the island and fined \$100,000.

Visitors to Cuba, particularly those who have travelled in other developing countries, rarely fail to admire the advances the island has made in so many areas of the life of its citizens in comparison with the other countries of Latin America. What they sometimes do not take into account is that these achievements have been gained despite suffering the longest blockade in history. The spirit of progress and solidarity that exists in Cuba is indeed testimony to the courage, determination and resilience of the population who know only too well what the results of succumbing to US intentions would lead to.