

USA PLANS TO FACILITATE TRAVEL TO CUBA



On March 17, the U.S. government will announce a new set of measures to facilitate travel to Cuba as well as trade with the country, as a part of the normalization process of bilateral relations, according to congressional sources.

Although the details are still to be worked out, it seems that the White House will relax the restrictions so that people who fit into 12 approved categories, such as traveling for family reasons, educational or cultural trips, can travel to Cuba.

The new measures will probably allow more people to go on self-directed tours without having to rely on group tours or be sponsored by an organization. Several U.S. airlines have applied for routes to Cuba following a bilateral agreement for regular scheduled flights that was signed recently.

The travel experts from the island expect that U.S. travel to Cuba could increase another 20 percent this year thanks to the changes. The administration believes that such moves to loosen the embargo would mainly benefit the Cuban people.

However, general tourism to Cuba will still be in force since it is part of the broader U.S. embargo which can only be lifted by the U.S. Congress. The embargo is not likely to be fully lifted any time soon, according to experts.

On the economic level, the US government intends to remove some existing barriers to trade and banking with the Caribbean island. If approved, the changes will be announced on the eve of Barack Obama's travel to Cuba, scheduled to take place between March 21 and 22. It will be the first visit of a U.S. president of Cuba under the regime of the Castro brothers in 88 years.

Obama will be accompanied by Secretary of State, John Kerry, and a delegation of some 20 lawmakers from the House of Representatives and Senate, as well as from the Democratic and Republican parties.

According to the White House, the president is planning to meet with a wide range of officials and citizens, including members of civil society, which is another word for internal dissent. **Obama's opposition criticizes the suggested measures as one-sided, expecting Cuban government to offer something in return.** Cuban President, Raul Castro, and his government however has taken only a few steps to allow U.S. companies and tourists to enter the island.

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