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'Arbitrary & unacceptable threat': Havana slams Trump for 'allowing' lawsuits against Cuban firms

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US President Donald Trump, seemingly punishing Havana for supporting Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, has tightened the trade embargo in a way that would open way for Americans to sue government-linked Cuban companies.

The measure takes the unprecedented step of permitting lawsuits against Cuban companies using properties confiscated after Fidel Castro took power in 1959, though it limits such suits to about 200 businesses and government agencies that are already subject to “enhanced” sanctions due to their close ties with the Cuban government.

“I strongly reject the State Department's announcement to authorize lawsuits under Title III of the Helms-Burton act, against a list of Cuban companies arbitrarily sanctioned by the Trump administration,” Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez tweeted, calling the beefed-up sanctions an “unacceptable threat against the world.”

The move activates part of a 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which if fully unleashed could potentially trigger a barrage of international lawsuits – against the US, by allies who aren't interested in curtailing their business ventures in Cuba in order to conform to an embargo even Trump's predecessor saw as a Cold War relic. The Helms-Burton Act was designed to “pressure” Cuba into “peaceful democratic change” – a contradiction not unlike the sanctions recently passed against sanction-choked Venezuela.

Maduro remains President of Venezuela despite the best efforts of the Trump administration to replace him with opposition leader Juan Guaido. National security adviser John Bolton, in an echo of George W. Bush's notorious "axis of evil," has lumped together Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua as a "troika of tyranny" and recently praised the Monroe Doctrine which calls for the US to expand its "sphere of influence" throughout the western hemisphere.

One of Trump's first acts as president was to reverse Barack Obama's loosening of trade restrictions with Cuba, which has been economically persona non grata since the revolution in 1959. Ironically, one of his companies may have violated the embargo in 1998 – a year before he floated his first presidential campaign by promising Cuban expats he'd never lift the embargo.

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