
4 lawmakers move to block U.S. flights to Cuba

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A group of U.S. lawmakers are working to block the Obama administration's efforts to open up the U.S. airways to flights from Cuba.

Citing concerns about Cuba's security infrastructure, four members of Congress – three Republicans and a Democrat – have officially called for a halt to recently announced commercial flights between the United States and the communist nation until a closer review of security measures at Cuba's airports can be conducted.

"How can this administration guarantee the American people there won't be a security threat on one of those planes?" said Rep. Richard Hudson, R-N.C., a former chair of the Transportation Security Subcommittee.

The U.S. Department of Transportation announced last week that 10 cities, including four in Florida, and eight airlines had won tentative U.S. government approval to schedule commercial air service between the United States and Havana. Last month, the [department awarded approval to six airlines](#) to fly to nine other Cuban cities.

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The addition of commercial flights to Cuba is seen as one of the biggest steps the White House has taken to [loosen the U.S. trade embargo](#) on that nation since Dec. 17, 2014, when President Barack Obama and Cuban leader Raúl Castro announced that they would move to normalize relations.

The administration has also eliminated limits on remittances, restored direct mail and allowed American companies to sell to Cuba on credit.

Transportation Department officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Last year well more than 600,000 passengers flew back and forth between the United States and Cuba on charter flights that often used aircraft leased from commercial airlines. The sponsors didn't address why security concerns weren't raised before.

The Transportation Security Administration, which is responsible for airport security in the United States, says it is assessing security measures at the Cuban airports that have been approved for service to the United States. The TSA is also working to finalize an arrangement with the Cuban government to place federal air marshals on flights between the United States and Cuba.

Rep. John Katko, a New York Republican who's the chair of the Transportation Security Subcommittee, is leading the push to stop the flights. He [introduced legislation](#) Tuesday with Hudson and Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul, R-Texas, and Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, that would prohibit commercial air travel between the United States and Cuba until the TSA certifies that Cuban airports have appropriate security measures. The bill also asks the Government Accountability Office to confirm that Cuba meets the standards.

It's unclear what future the legislation will have. Support has been growing on both sides of the aisle for better ties with Cuba, which is only 90 miles from the tip of Florida. One Democrat has signed up to support the legislation, but it is unlikely many others will follow an effort that goes against one of Obama's most prominent policy initiatives.

The legislation has a better chance of passing the House of Representatives than the Senate, where a growing number of Republicans support improved relations in hopes of providing economic opportunities for their states. Several Republicans joined Obama on his trip to Cuba in March.

Katko wants to slow things down. He notes that it was only last year that Cuba was removed as a state sponsor of terrorism. Katko was among a group of members of the Homeland Security Committee who were denied visas to Cuba for a scheduled visit to review security measures at Cuban airports.

"We still don't know if Cuba has the adequate body scanners and explosive-detection systems in place, whether it has the technology to screen for fraudulent passports or ID, whether or how aviation workers are screened and if federal air marshals will be allowed to fly missions to Cuba on commercial flights," he said in a statement.

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