

U.S. activists are campaigning to remove Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list

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Photo: Abel Padrón Padilla

To most countries, particularly fellow nations in the Global South, Cuba is a sovereign nation recognized for its leadership in healthcare, diplomacy, and human development. The US government, however, has a different, and quite unique, view: Officially, Cuba is categorized as a “State Sponsor of Terrorism.”

Only four countries on earth are currently designated by the US as State Sponsors of Terrorism (SSTs): Iran, Syria, Cuba, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Cuba was first placed on this list under the Reagan administration in 1982. In 2015, the Obama administration rescinded Cuba’s SST status as part of a broader push for normalization of relations. However, a lame-duck maneuver by the Trump administration in January 2021 placed Cuba back on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list. This designation has continued under President Biden.

Now, 57 member organizations of the National Network on Cuba (NNOC) have launched the #OffTheList campaign to remove Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List.



Following a campaign launch on Valentine's Day 2023, activists across the country made hundreds of calls to the White House on March 14 and 15. NNOC plans to follow up with an action in Washington, DC, on June 25, and are calling on

supporters to join a rally in front of the White House. Advocates say that Cuba's SST designation is unwarranted, unjust, and ultimately harmful to the people of the island.

Beyond the use of social media and direct action, the NNOC campaign is also urging participants to pass resolutions in their trade unions, schools, and local municipalities: "We encourage you to initiate a resolution to expand public support for removing Cuba from the U.S. 'State Sponsors of Terrorism' List."

"It's critical for those of us in the United States to speak up about it—and for people around the world to speak up," Shaquille Fontenot, an NNOC co-chair, told The Real News. "It's a humanitarian issue at this point, not just a political issue. It's way beyond that."

Washington's rationale for Cuba's designation

Upon announcing its decision to place Cuba back on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, the Trump administration made it pretty clear that the decision was rooted in longstanding, Cold War-era hostility towards Cuba for being a sovereign socialist nation—and, as such, being a source of political and economic influence in Latin America that runs counter to the influence and hegemonic dominance of the US. "The Trump Administration has been focused from the start on denying the Castro regime the resources it uses to oppress its people at home," a Jan. 11, 2021, memo issued by the US Embassy in Havana stated, "and countering its malign interference in Venezuela and the rest of the Western Hemisphere."

That being said, the stated pretext for the Trump administration's fateful decision allegedly stemmed from the island's role in hosting peace negotiations between the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

Colombia has been locked in an ongoing civil war for decades, but in 2016 a peace deal was struck between the government and the FARC guerrillas. Negotiations with the ELN began shortly after, with Cuba stepping in as a guarantor and host of the peace process.

In 2018, Ivan Duque was elected president of Colombia on a platform that pledged to “correct” the peace process, which he claimed did not impose harsh enough penalties upon former FARC combatants. As the ceasefire began to crumble, a faction of the ELN bombed a police academy in Bogota in 2019, killing 22 and injuring dozens more. Duque unilaterally ended the peace talks in response and demanded the Cuban government extradite 10 ELN peace negotiators.

The Cuban government refused, noting that complying with the extradition order would violate the negotiation protocols based on international norms previously agreed to by the ELN and the Colombian government. The government of Norway, another key player in the peace process, backed up Cuba’s stance. Colombia’s recently elected President Gustavo Petro has since rescinded Duque’s extradition order and resumed peace talks with the ELN.

Two years after the Colombian peace talks in Cuba fell apart, and just nine days before Trump himself left office, the Trump administration slapped Cuba with the SST label, citing both the extradition orders against the ELN and Cuba’s longstanding commitment to providing asylum for US political refugees, including former Black Panther Assata Shakur. A number of former intelligence and diplomatic officials decried the move.

Despite promises to the contrary, the Biden administration has yet to significantly alter the sanctions against Cuba instituted by Trump, including its designation as an SST.

Although the consequences of a country finding itself on the SST list have global

implications, Washington is under no obligation to demonstrate the substance of its accusations to the world—or even to courts within the US. The decision to label a country an SST is entirely at the president’s discretion. No process to regularly review or appeal states’ inclusion on the list exists. “We know the State Sponsors of Terrorism List is maintained solely by the US... that already makes it unfair because there aren’t any checks or balances,” noted Fontenot.

Cuba is not the only country with an SST designation that seems more motivated by fickle political considerations than any clear or consistent definition of terrorism. In the 1980s, for instance, Iraq had its designation removed to facilitate US arms transfers during the Iran-Iraq War—only to be placed back on the list once the First Gulf War began. Other states, including Sudan and North Korea, have been shuffled on and off the list depending on the status of their relations with Washington.

Cuba’s ongoing SST designation continues to obstruct relations between Washington and Havana. In March, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla tweeted: “the State Department qualifying lists are nothing but instruments for political and economic coercion that are totally alienated from issues so sensitive as terrorism, religion, human rights, drug trafficking and corruption, among others.”

El Bloqueo

When the US government designates a country a State Sponsor of Terrorism, it triggers a series of sanctions against the targeted country designed to restrict its ability to engage in international banking and trade. Contrary to the euphemistic explanations offered by Washington (that such sanctions are “targeted,” that they only affect the government or certain industries, that they are a “more peaceful” alternative to war, etc.), such measures inevitably and directly affect the lives and livelihoods of everyday citizens in sanctioned countries.

In the case of Cuba, the effects of being designated an SST compound the effects of

Washington's decades-long blockade. For more than 60 years, the blockade has severely restricted Cuba's ability to engage in international trade, provide for its people, and advance its own development. A State Department memo circulated in 1960 clearly spelled out Washington's ultimate goal with the blockade: "to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government."

The blockade's effects became particularly pronounced after the fall of the Soviet Union—a time remembered in Cuba as the "Special Period." Previously, the overwhelming majority of Cuban imports and exports had flowed through the Soviet Union, enabling the former to develop in spite of the US-imposed blockade, but the sudden collapse in trade starved the island of fuel and capital, sending agricultural and industrial production tumbling. Although wages and caloric intake plummeted, historian Helen Yaffe notes, the state continued to do everything it could to meet basic needs. Not a single school or hospital closed.



Shaquille Fontenot, an NNOC co-chair. Photo: Bill Hackwell

The succeeding decades have been a period of recovery and reorientation to a

changed world. Tourism, medical services, pharmaceuticals, and mining exports have become important new industries for Cuba's survival. While the thaw in relations with the US during the Obama era seemed to brighten Cuba's prospects, recent years have proven harsher for the country and its people.

That's precisely why Fontenot says the NNOC #OffTheList campaign is so urgent. "Right now, the effects of the blockade and the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation have created conditions in Cuba that many scholars and Cuban people are comparing to the Special Period."

How the SST designation impacts the Cuban people

Once in office, the Trump administration dedicated itself to reversing whatever progress had been made on a myriad of policy issues under Obama, including imposing 243 new sanctions against Cuba. Then, to make matters worse, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the Cuban government closed its borders to tourists out of the necessity to save lives.

Washington ignored international calls to lift the blockade during the pandemic, even going as far as to block flights delivering humanitarian aid. Despite manufacturing its own domestically developed vaccines, Cuba lacked sufficient needles to administer them for a number of months. When the delta variant wave of the coronavirus struck in the summer of 2021, the country's sole oxygen plant failed due to a shortage of supplies caused by the blockade.

It's a certain fact that the US blockade directly contributed to the 8,500 deaths from COVID-19 in Cuba. In spite of these challenges, Cuba's medical response was objectively superior to that of the US, both in terms of proportion of the population served and lives saved

This is the crucial background that throws the barbarity of the Trump

administration's SST label into relief. During the darkest days of a novel pandemic that gripped the world, as the Cuban people wrestled with mass human suffering, death, and fear, the United States chose to tighten the screws rather than extend a hand in solidarity, or at least mercy.

International banks were already reluctant to engage in business with Cuba due to the blockade, and they were right to be: the US has not shied away from prosecuting even non-US banks that violate its dicta. In 2012, British bank HSBC forfeited \$1.2 billion—and in 2015, French bank BNP Paribas surrendered \$8.9 billion—after being targeted by US prosecutors for conducting transactions on behalf of individuals in a number of sanctioned countries, including Cuba. The US government's ability to enforce its sanctions internationally, a function of the dollar's supreme position in global trade and banking as the world's international currency reserve, is precisely what has made the blockade against Cuba so powerful.

Once Cuba was redesignated an SST, banks doubled down on their restrictions, and the few that had once been willing to do business with Cuban nationals stopped doing so. In 2021, dozens of Cuban entrepreneurs addressed an open letter to President Biden describing the ongoing, US-imposed restrictions on travel, banking, and electronic transfers as both harmful to their businesses and "cruel." Cuba's Foreign Ministry estimates that the blockade costs Cuba as much as \$15 million a day.

In another letter delivered to President Biden this March, over 20 faith-based organizations in the US cited the SST designation as a direct impediment to their efforts to deliver humanitarian aid:

In response to relisting on the SST, banks, financial institutions, and international vendors ceased helping facilitate both regular trade and cooperation with faith groups seeking to provide humanitarian and development support to Cuba. Overnight our denominational partners in Cuba began to face shortages of necessary

items, including a lack of access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene articles, and materials essential for public health, such as medicines and medical devices. It has become increasingly impossible for our denominations and faith-based organizations to get much-needed aid and funds to our Cuban partners. Banks have frozen our funds for permitted religious and humanitarian activities, demanding additional licensing. They perceive the risks of fines and so insist on over-complying with the current restrictions.

Even Cubans living abroad have felt the sting. According to Spanish media, dual citizens of Cuba and Spain have been unable to open personal bank accounts and have even had their existing accounts frozen since the SST designation.

For everyday Cuban people, the blockade alone was bad enough before the implementation of additional restrictions tied to the SST List. Cuba's efforts to survive in spite of the blockade are a testament to its people's ingenuity and determination; however, there are limits to what can be achieved without access to global markets and production. A recent Oxfam report titled Right to Live Without a Blockade found substantial impacts on sectors as diverse as education, agriculture, and biotechnology stemming from the blockade—owing to limitations imposed by lack of access to computers, fertilizers, and other technologies and inputs that could transform existing industries.

In 2022, the UN General Assembly voted for the 30th consecutive year to approve a resolution calling for an end to the blockade against Cuba. Yet, as of now, the blockade continues.

Last May, the Biden administration announced a series of measures to support the Cuban people, including the restoration of remittance deliveries. However, none of these measures included substantial changes to the comprehensive blockade against Cuba, nor did they involve changing its designation as a State Sponsor of Terror.

Time is running out for the Biden administration to act. A new Congressional bill, HR 314: Fighting Oppression until the Reign of Castro Ends (or FORCE) Act, would seek to prohibit Cuba from ever being removed from the SST List “until the President makes the determination that a transition government in Cuba is in power.” (Given the bill’s name, it ought to be noted that Castro has not been in power in Cuba since the election of current President Miguel Díaz-Canel in 2019.)

Biden, however, doesn’t appear to be making any significant moves on Cuba any time soon, and with the 2024 election cycle officially in full swing, that is unlikely to change. When asked in March by Florida Republican Rep. Maria Salazar if the Biden administration had any plans to remove Cuba from the SST List, Sec. of State Anthony Blinken denied any such plans existed.

Building bridges for a shared future

For Fontenot, the significance of the blockade extends to its effects on people living in the US. “Being able to see what Cubans have decided for themselves is a major wake-up call for young people in America. We don’t have free education or free healthcare in the United States.”

Indeed, despite being a blockaded nation, Cuba’s socialist healthcare system and highly innovative medical industry put the US’s extortionately inaccessible system to shame. As of 2022, average lifespans in the US are three years shorter than those in Cuba. Fontenot also referred to several Cuban medical innovations that US patients are largely unable to access due to the blockade, such as an internationally recognized lung cancer vaccine.

Fontenot didn’t stop there. She also gestured towards the Cuban democratic process itself as something Americans might envy, if they only knew. “Look at the 2022 Cuban Family Code referendum,” she noted, referring to the passage of what many legal experts have recognized as the world’s most progressive set of laws on gender

equality and the rights of children, the elderly, and LGBTQ people. “Compare that to what we’re seeing in the United States right now—this massive attack against queer and trans people, and ultimately against access to education.”

By all indications, the US government is not keen on US citizens learning about all that Cuba’s socialism has to offer. In May, activists with two separate youth delegations returning from Cuba were detained and interrogated by US Customs and Border Patrol—including members of a 60-person delegation organized by NNOC. In a public statement released by NNOC, the organization remained defiant, “Solidarity is not a crime—the US blockade is!”

“There are so many cultural, environmental, and educational exchanges that could happen if relations were normalized,” Fontenot says. “We’re in a moment here where people [in the US] are seeing the parallels between our own experiences and what’s done in our name to people abroad. People here need food, water, shelter—and people in Cuba need those things too. The same institutions are keeping

those things from all of us. That’s why it’s critical for us in America to speak up about it. People around the world need to see the truth.”

Source: [Resumen](#)

