

# *U.S. State Department makes staff cuts at its embassy in Cuba permanent*

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Washington, March 2 (RHC)-- The U.S. Embassy in Havana will make staff reductions permanent, the State Department announced on Friday.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson ordered the departure of all non-essential personnel from the U.S. mission in Havana on September 29th, in the wake of yet unexplained health incidents reported by some diplomats.

Under the new move, the U.S. embassy in Havana will permanently operate with the minimum personnel necessary to perform core diplomatic and consular functions. The embassy will also operate as an unaccompanied post, meaning no family members of embassy staff will be permitted to reside on the island.

Cuba has strongly denied any involvement in the incidents and even rejected the idea that there have been attacks. Separate investigations conducted by experts teams of both Cuba and the U.S. have both failed to identify the cause of the symptoms reported.

Friday's announced decision by the State department contrasts sharply with a petition signed by twenty-eight U.S. travel companies and pro-normalization Congresspeople, who asked the State Department and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to send diplomats back to Cuba.

Based on a survey that shows Cuba is a safe destination, the group also asked to lower a travel advisory from Level 3 ("reconsider travel") to at least Level 2 ("exercise increased caution").

The survey of 42 tour operators and educational travel organizations conducted in January by the Washington-based Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) found that none of these companies' clients reported any health issues similar to those reported by the U.S. diplomats. Together, the 42 companies sent 42,000 travelers to Cuba in 2016 and 2017.

"In addition, there have been no confirmed cases of similar illness among the estimated 700,000 private U.S. citizens who visited the island nation in 2017," a press release from the Washington-based Center for Responsible Travel also said. At the FITUR travel show in Madrid, Cuba received the Excelencias award for safest destination worldwide.

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