



**Statement of Subcommittee Chairman John Katko (R-NY)
Transportation Security Subcommittee**

*Flying Blind: What are the risks of resuming U.S. commercial air service to Cuba?
May 17, 2016*

Remarks as Prepared

On February 16th, U.S. and Cuban officials signed an accord which will allow more than 100 daily round-trip flights between the United States and Cuba. As has been the practice of this Administration, the deal was signed with minimal consultation or input from Congress.

In fact, countless attempts by this committee to attain information about various aspects of the negotiations and requirements to begin regularly scheduled commercial service to Cuba have been stonewalled. Despite having been briefed numerous times by components of the Department prior to this hearing, I learned only yesterday from a press release that on May 5th Deputy Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Cuban government that has far-reaching implications for DHS. The Administration's lack of transparency on this issue is unacceptable, and leads me to believe that the Administration is either hiding something, or worse, simply negligent of the security concerns associated with this policy.

Immediately following the signing of the February 16th agreement, the Department of Transportation opened the application process for U.S. air carriers to bid on routes for regularly scheduled commercial air service to all ten of Cuba's international airports. After a 54-year freeze in diplomatic relations, the Administration is attempting to designate these ten Cuban airports as last points of departure, or LPDs, to the United States.

Only seven other foreign countries in the world have ten or more LPD airports to the U.S. This includes some of our closest allies and trading partners, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Mexico. China, with an estimated 1.3 billion people and the third largest country in the world by land mass, has only 11 LPD airports. But the Administration wants to designate 10 LPD airports in Cuba. Cuba, a country that could fit into China over 127 times. A country whose population is less than 1 percent that of China.

In a briefing on March 17th, officials from TSA stated their intention to certify three additional airports in Cuba as LPDs by late summer. The picture officials from TSA paint of the security situation at Cuba's airports is bleak. Cuba possesses no explosive trace detection equipment. The bomb sniffing dogs are poorly trained at best. The only two full body scanners on the entire island are in Havana. These body scanners are Chinese-made, as is almost all of the security equipment the Cubans possess. TSA could offer no information on the security training, if any, that airport officials receive, and were unaware if airport workers are vetted for potential links to terrorism. Given the continued U.S. embargo, the

Administration is prohibited from supplying any security equipment or offering training to the Cuban government.

Additionally, TSA predicted that with the introduction of commercial air service, passenger volume would increase to a level that Cuban authorities and airport infrastructure are unprepared and perhaps unable to handle.

If the status quo remains the same, the Cuban government will not allow U.S. airlines to hire their own personnel to perform basic functions—such as ticketing and check in—or more complex functions—such as airline security operations—at the airports in Cuba. Instead, employees of the Cuban government perform all of these duties. Even though earlier this year, Lt. General Stewart, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee, “Cuba also remains a critical counterintelligence threat.”

But the Administration is telling us that we should entrust the safety and security of American citizens to the Cuban government. A country that was just removed from the state sponsors of terrorism list one year ago on May 29. A country whose leaders have repeatedly derided the values and principles for which our great nation stands. This is unsettling to say the least.

Historically, flights to and from Cuba have been attractive targets for terrorists and hijackers. In May 2007 two armed Cuban soldiers who went AWOL hijacked a public bus which they ran through the airport perimeter in Havana in an attempt to hijack a plane bound for Miami.¹ Two Cuban passenger flights were hijacked to the United States within two weeks in 2003.² I could go on. These types of incidents, which have occurred far too many times in recent history, raise serious concerns about the ability and the willingness of Cuban officials to take airport security and passenger screening seriously.

To make matters even more concerning, on April 17th, the Washington Post published an article on the increased flow of individuals from Afghanistan traveling to Cuba. The article states that “travel agents in Kabul have been surprised by Afghans showing up at their offices with Cuban visas, which are suspected of having been issued in Iran or acquired on the black market.” It is suspected that they use Cuba as a gateway into the United States or Canada.³ Without objection, I ask unanimous consent that this article be inserted into the record.

So there you have it. These are the concerns and they are multifaceted and serious. We are here today, not to debate the merits of the Administration’s rapprochement with Cuba, but to take a serious look at the national security implications of a policy that has been pushed through at a break neck speed, with seemingly minimal regard for the security and safety of the American people.

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¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cuban-fugitives-try-to-hijack-plane/>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/americas/04/01/cuba.hijacking/>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/kabul-libre-one-new-afghan-trail-to-the-west-goes-through-cuba/2016/04/16/da214926-0188-11e6-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html