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US Sanctions Cuban Leaders Over Rights Abuses

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The United States has imposed sweeping sanctions on Cuba's top leadership, including President Miguel Díaz-Canel, citing their crackdown on public dissent and systemic human rights violations during the July 2021 protests in Cuba.

In an announcement timed with the fourth anniversary of the demonstrations, United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced visa restrictions against Díaz-Canel, Defense Minister Álvaro López Miera, Interior Minister Lázaro Alberto Álvarez Casas, and several judicial and prison officials accused of overseeing mass detentions and torture. The

measures mark another escalation in Washington's strategy to exert economic and political pressure on the communist government, which has faced growing criticism for suppressing basic freedoms.

The July 2021 protests saw thousands of Cubans take to the streets demanding food, medicine, and economic reforms amid severe shortages and worsening living standards. Security forces arrested hundreds, with one person reported dead and dozens injured in the largest demonstrations since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution. According to official reports, at least 1,000 individuals were arrested and reduced charges followed for about 790, with roughly 554 still reportedly imprisoned as of late 2024; earlier estimates from human rights groups suggested around 400 remained detained in 2022.

While the Cuban leadership insists the sanctions are an act of interference, Rubio called the measures a necessary response to what he described as "gross abuses" by officials accused of detaining and torturing protesters opposed to free expression. He also called for immediate proof of life and the release of José Daniel Ferrer, a prominent dissident and head of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, known as UNPACU, who was re-imprisoned after briefly gaining parole under a Vatican-brokered deal.

Washington also added the newly built Torre K Hotel in Havana to a restricted list of properties that Americans are barred from patronizing, as part of its broader effort to target revenue linked to the Cuban regime. Officials argued that the lavish spending on luxury developments while ordinary Cubans struggle to afford necessities underscores the leadership's disregard for its people.

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez and other officials condemned the sanctions, accusing the United States of hypocrisy and attempting to destabilize the country. Yet for many in the Cuban exile community and among conservative lawmakers, the policy represents a necessary stand against a regime that has long denied fundamental rights.

The measures extend the hardline approach revived by President Donald Trump, who designated Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism in late 2024, reversing the prior administration's steps toward diplomatic normalization. The renewed restrictions reflect a broader push in Washington to hold authoritarian governments accountable and limit their access to international financing.

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