**Headline:** Trump and Rubio Tighten the Noose on Cuba

**Teaser:** The impacts of a tightened US blockade, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the return of Trump with a vindictive Marco Rubio as Secretary of State have deepened the crisis in Cuba, making international solidarity with the island more important than ever.

By Manolo De Los Santos

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**Source:** Globetrotter

**Tags:** North America/United States of America, North America/Cuba, Trade, Economy, GOP/Right Wing, Trump, Biden, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

Cuba is once again facing a severe, multi-faceted crisis, [not due to the hurricanes](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/10/13/cuba-in-the-eye-of-washingtons-hurricane/) that [pummel through the Caribbean every year](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/10/05/how-cuba-is-dealing-with-the-devastation-of-hurricane-ian/), but from the relentless and suffocating pressure exerted by its powerful neighbour to the north. This is a recurring story of a people striving for independence under an unyielding siege and blockade. Through deliberate actions, the US government has been meticulously constructing and enforcing even greater barriers that threaten the very survival of the Cuban people.

The latest expression of this crisis came on 30 May with an announcement from ETECSA, Cuba’s state-owned telecommunications company, [regarding](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cuba-partially-rolls-back-internet-rate-hike-anger-grows-2025-06-03/) a significant rate hike for mobile data. While seemingly minor to outsiders, for Cubans, it ignited a major criticism born of simmering frustrations. The new rates, particularly for additional data, are high in comparison to the average salary. An extra 3 GB now costs 3,360 Cuban pesos, nearly ten times the price of the monthly 6 GB plan. This is not merely a price adjustment; it came as a shock to the vast majority of Cuba’s 8 million mobile phone users, many of whom rely on internet access for education, work, and to connect with family abroad. This ETECSA announcement, though, is not an isolated incident; it underscores the immense strain under which Cuba attempts to meet the basic needs of its people under the US blockade.

**Tightening the Blockade**

For those less familiar with Cuba’s recent history, the island’s economy, already reeling from the pandemic’s devastating blow to tourism and [the six-decade blockade](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/09/13/sixty-years-of-sanctions-against-cuba-have-made-life-extremely-difficult-for-ordinary-cubans/), has been further squeezed since Trump first took office. The 243 sanctions imposed by Trump during 2017–2021 remain in place, a suffocating blanket woven into the fabric of daily life. Even under President Biden, who campaigned on promises of change, the pressure was maintained.

Back in 2017, the US accused Cuba of ‘sonic attacks’ on its embassy officials. The claim was later proven false, yet it served its purpose: it was a pretext for Trump to freeze relations, collapse tourism, and close the door to the over 600,000 annual US visitors. Then came the shutdown of Western Union in 2020, disrupting vital remittances. The suspension of visa services at the US Embassy in Havana in 2017 sparked the largest wave of irregular migration since 1980, a desperate exodus of Cubans seeking any way out.

The economic devastation since then has been profound. Cuba’s GDP shrank by a staggering 15% in 2019 and an additional 11% in 2020. Imagine a country unable to purchase basic necessities due to banking restrictions, its public services and industries crippled. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, [Cuba’s robust public healthcare system](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/03/18/healthcare-in-cuba-how-a-tiny-island-defies-us-sanctions-to-lead-in-healthcare/), a [point of national pride](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/06/14/access-equity-and-solidarity-the-foundations-of-cubas-health-system/), found itself under immense pressure. Its [only oxygen plant, critical for treating patients](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/07/11/cuban-president-slams-us-for-genocidal-act-of-depriving-cubans-of-oxygen-during-the-pandemic/), became non-operational because it couldn’t import spare parts due to the blockade. Thousands of Cubans struggled to breathe, yet Washington refused to make exceptions.

**Cuba’s Response to Deepening Crisis**

Trump’s final act in office, listing Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism in January 2021, was a devastating blow. This designation makes it nearly impossible for Cuba to engage in normal financial transactions, cutting off vital trade. Then, in the first 14 months of the Biden administration, the Cuban economy lost an estimated USD 6.35 billion due to the continued Trump sanctions, preventing crucial investments in its ageing energy grid and the purchase of food and medicine. The Cuban peso plummeted, devaluing already low public sector wages. While the rationing system provides a subsistence diet, this level of deprivation hasn’t been felt since the ‘Special Period’ of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Faced with these severe constraints, the Cuban government has had to adapt. In 2020, it began to [rely more heavily on the private sector](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/07/25/cuba-reaffirms-socialism-while-it-reckons-with-its-private-sector/) as both a new source of employment and an importer of basic goods – a pragmatic step born of necessity. Over 8,000 small- and medium-sized businesses have registered since 2021, and in 2023, the private sector was on track to import $1 billion in goods. While this rise of the private sector has boosted the import of some supplies, it has also introduced new challenges for Cuba’s socialist project by creating income disparities, a stark contrast to Cuba’s historic emphasis on equitable wealth distribution.

[President Miguel Díaz-Canel](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/04/07/we-will-prevail-a-conversation-with-cubas-president-miguel-diaz-canel/) has consistently emphasised the government’s commitment to providing essential services while acknowledging the need for change due to the current scenario of an ever-tightened blockade. He defines Cuba’s socialist project of social justice not merely as welfare, but as a fair distribution of income where those who earn more contribute more, and those who cannot are supported. This is the tightrope the Revolution walks: balancing economic realities with its foundational principles. The leadership insists on safeguarding the socialist project and guaranteeing essential services while resisting calls for major privatisation efforts.

The pandemic, which decimated tourism, Cuba’s leading industry, further exacerbated the crisis. Despite dwindling access to hard foreign currency, the government spent hundreds of millions of dollars on medical supplies and continued to guarantee salaries, food, electricity, and water, adding $2.4 billion to its debt to cover basic needs.

**Six Decades of US Regime Change Attempts**

The ultimate obstacle consuming Cuba’s every effort to meet the basic needs of its people is the open and [unrelenting antagonism of the United States](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/08/30/us-unwilling-to-improve-relations-with-cuba/). The US government’s objective from day one of the Cuban Revolution has been [regime change](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/03/29/conservatives-in-the-us-want-the-cuban-people-to-overthrow-their-own-government-or-else/), achieved by manufacturing worsening conditions and sponsoring internal subversion. While the blockade has always hindered Cuba’s development, for the first three decades, Soviet support and a favourable environment in the Third World offset much of its impact. The 1990s, which became known as the ‘Special Period’, were a crisis of immense proportions, as Cuba had to face the might of the US blockade on its own, yet the era forced innovative responses that allowed Cuba to survive.

However, the current moment is different. The cumulative effects of Trump’s sanctions, the pandemic, the global economic downturn, Biden’s inaction, and the [return of Trump](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/01/22/trump-reinstates-cuba-as-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism/) with a [vindictive Marco Rubio](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/02/27/destroying-cubas-international-medical-missions-marco-rubios-new-goal/) as Secretary of State have created a perfect storm for the US to attempt its long-held objectives of regime change. Lester Mallory’s infamous memorandum from 1960, which explicitly stated that the blockade’s aim was to cause internal rebellion through hunger and desperation, has found a new, more sophisticated application. This strategy is forcing the Cuban state to adopt measures that might be contrary to its project but are critical for its survival in a period of great hostility.

State-owned enterprises, the bedrock of Cuba’s socialist economy, are crumbling under the inability to fund much-needed maintenance or generate enough foreign currency reserves, due to the blockade.

ETECSA, heavily sanctioned by the US, has been left with few to no options to renovate its entire internal infrastructure besides raising its rates for the first time in years. From its servers to radio base stations, all require imported technology. The state, historically capable of subsidising everything from education and health to transportation and food, is being forced to reduce, adapt, and in some cases, relinquish its ability to meet all needs at once. Garbage collection, water services, and most critically, [electricity, face such severe challenges](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/10/18/cuba-faces-nation-wide-blackout-activists-renew-calls-for-an-end-to-the-blockade/) that their dysfunction breeds not only frustration but a growing disbelief in the state’s capacity to solve these problems.

While the US government, in sixty years of economic warfare, has failed to overthrow the Cuban state outright, its measures have now begun to have their most severe impact, to the point where the Trump administration and its henchmen, like Marco Rubio, are further tightening the noose on the Cuban state’s ability to meet the people’s needs. Whatever measures Cuba takes at this moment are not signs of weakness or surrender, but a direct consequence of the crisis forced upon it by the blockade.

The people’s responses to this crisis have been varied. Since July 2021, [protests, often small and isolated](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/03/19/what-the-us-media-isnt-telling-you-about-the-protests-in-cuba/), have become a normal occurrence across the island, and Cubans overall have become more vocal in their criticisms and demands of the Cuban state. In response to the ETECSA price increase, Cubans across diverse sectors of society have voiced criticism. Among them are students and chapters of the Federation of University Students (FEU) across campuses, which, since the announcement, have not only criticised but also led direct negotiations with the Cuban state and ETECSA to find solutions. Nonetheless, like clockwork, anti-Cuban voices in the US have tried to exploit this moment of crisis to manipulate the students’ criticisms into attempts to overthrow the Cuban Revolution.

In response to this, Roberto Morales, a high-ranking leader of the Communist Party, [condemned the](https://www.facebook.com/roberto.morales.ojeda.2025/posts/no-son-pocas-las-manipulaciones-medi%C3%A1ticas-ni-las-tergiversaciones-oportunistas-/122144784422617974/) ‘media manipulations and opportunistic distortions’ that ‘enemies of the Revolution have attempted to impose’. While legitimate critiques by the people are understandable and an important aspect of life in Cuba, he argues that they must be viewed within the larger context of a nation under siege. The objective of Trump and Rubio, as it always has been for the anti-Cuban elements in Miami, Morales declares, has been ‘to sow chaos, promote violence, and shatter the peace of our homeland’.

**Human Toll of the Blockade**

An even bigger response to this crisis, however, has been the largest wave of migration in Cuban history, surpassing the Mariel boatlift and the 1994 rafter crisis combined. Nearly 425,000 Cubans migrated to the US in 2022 and 2023, representing over 4% of the population. Thousands more have gone to Spain, Mexico, Brazil, and other countries. Cuba’s population has fallen below 10 million for the first time since the early 1980s, losing 13% of its inhabitants since its peak in 2012. Yet the US, which for decades has created the conditions for and promoted this mass migration of Cubans, has taken a sharp turn. Cuban asylum seekers are being deported, and Cuba was just [added](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trump-signs-proclamation-banning-travel-12-countries-cbs-news-reports-2025-06-04/) to Trump’s travel ban list, outright banning Cubans from travelling safely and legally to the US.

This is the stark reality for Cuba: a country besieged, its people enduring great hardship, and its government adapting in ways that are both necessary and challenging for survival. The challenges are immense, and the sacrifices of its people are profound to sustain the gains of its revolution.

It is in this context that the solidarity of people in the world and [in the US](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/05/20/revolution-is-a-never-ending-song-gabriela-silva-on-drawing-inspiration-from-the-cuban-revolution/) must be forged anew. We cannot simply be aware; we must be active. We must go beyond raising awareness and take actionable steps to support the Cuban people. This means demanding an end to the brutal and genocidal US blockade, a cruel and inhumane policy that punishes an entire nation for its commitment to self-determination. It means supporting humanitarian aid efforts, advocating for diplomatic engagement, and mobilising for a world without sanctions and blockades. The Cuban people need more than our sympathy; they need our active, unwavering solidarity.