

Caribbean Leaders Reject Visa Threats Over Cuban Medical Program, Willing to Lose American Access

Caribbean leaders reject the US policy targeting Cuba’s medical export program. Prime Ministers Rowley, Mottley, and Browne defend their reliance on Cuban doctors, stating they would rather lose US visas than weaken healthcare systems that depend on them.

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Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley

At the beginning of the month, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that U.S. visas may be [stripped or withheld](#) from government officials — in Cuba or other countries — “believed to be responsible for, or involved in, the Cuban labor export program,” which the United States has deemed exploitative.

However, leaders of Caribbean countries who have benefited from decades of participation in the program — which embeds Cuban doctors within the public healthcare systems of recipient countries — are now saying they're willing to risk losing travel access to the United States if necessary.

Dr. Keith Rowley, outgoing Prime Minister of Trinidad & Tobago, says he is content with never traveling to America again, if that's what it takes to protect his country's sovereignty. He noted that Trinidad has hired medical specialists from around the globe — “from India, from the Philippines, sometimes from Africa, and mainly from Cuba.” These specialists are paid “top dollar — equal to local rates,” Dr. Rowley said, pushing back on accusations of human trafficking.

Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley expressed similar sentiments, despite the country reportedly not currently having a working cohort of Cuban medical professionals. However, Ms. Mottley said that Cuban healthcare staff played a pivotal role just a few years ago. “I will be the first to go to the line and to tell you that we could not get through the pandemic without the Cuban nurses and the Cuban doctors,” she said while addressing colleagues in Parliament this week. Like Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados paid the Cuban health professionals the same wages as their local counterparts. “The notion...that we were involved in human trafficking...was fully repudiated and rejected by us,” Ms. Mottley said, noting that the accusation has not just been made by this administration but also under President Biden as well. “If we cannot reach a sensible agreement on this matter, then if the cost of it is the loss of my visa to the US, then so be it,” she declared.

Gaston Browne, Prime Minister of Antigua & Barbuda, has also come out strongly against the new State Department policy, telling the United States to treat the region with “some degree” of respect. “If they were to take punitive action because of the presence of Cuban medical personnel in our healthcare systems, it would practically dismantle these systems across the region,” he argued. “The US must understand that these Cuban medical personnel represent the core of our healthcare services within the Caribbean,” Mr. Browne said on his weekly radio program last weekend. However, he expressed willingness to review the payment structure and schedule for Cuban medical professionals when they are deployed in the region. Nevertheless, he insisted that the United States needs to soften its rhetoric on the issue. “I don't see the need for them to threaten us,” he remarked. “Even though we are small and powerless, they ought to respect our sovereignty.”

The issue is certain to be at the top of the agenda for discussion late this month, as Mr. Rubio and other State Department and White House officials prepare for their visit to the region.