The Virgin Islands Consortium

Obama Lifts Limits On Cuban Cigars And Rum, Cementing Normalized Relations

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ST. THOMAS -- The Obama Administration on Friday moved to solidify its historic opening of Cuba by issuing a far-reaching directive that will have reverberations far past his presidency, ridding the U.S. and Cuba of half-century of Cold War era policies -- the crux of which was an embargo on the island nation, and America's secret plot to destabilize the Cuban Government.

Mr. Obama, through a twelve-page document, and among other policy changes, lifted the $100 limit on bringing Cuban rum and cigars to the U.S.

“This directive takes a comprehensive and whole-of-government approach to promote engagement with the Cuban government and people, and make our opening to Cuba irreversible,” Mr. Obama said in a statement, posted on Whitehouse.gov. “Challenges remain — and very real differences between our governments persist on issues of democracy and human rights — but I believe that engagement is the best way to address those differences and make progress on behalf of our interests and values.”

“We are not seeking to impose regime change on Cuba,” Mr. Obama added, asserting that “the embargo is outdated and should be lifted.”

The move will have reverberations for the Caribbean's tourism sector, with St. Thomas being one of the leading destinations. Cuba, seen as an emerging market relative to tourism, is predicted to attract millions of U.S.-based visitors annually, who would have otherwise visited different Caribbean destinations.

Department of Tourism Commissioner Beverly Nicholson-Doty, while acknowledging the potential impact on the territory caused by Cuba’s reopening, said in September of last year that the territory's own product would remain stable if it continues to refine it and, where possible, forge ties with Cuba.

And she sighted Columbia as an example of her position on the unfolding developments in Cuba. Columbia was once a country plagued by drug-related violence. However, it emerged as a powerhouse in tourism in 8 years — from 2002 to 2010 — and continues to see sustained growth today. Yet, the surrounding countries did not witness a decline; instead, they grew, she said. Columbia lifted the tide.

“The bottom line, Columbia’s growth does not appear to have been at the expense of its neighbors,” Nicholson-Doty said. “All boats were lifted by significant interest in travel to Latin America."

She added: "I believe that the recent developments around the travel to Cuba will have a positive impact on the Caribbean region as a whole, including the U.S. Virgin Islands.”

Friday's action was the sixth round of regulatory changes announced by the Treasury and Commerce Departments aimed at easing travel to Cuba as well as trade and commerce between the United States and the island nation.

The actions built on earlier moves by Mr. Obama, and comes as his administration nears its end. Last month, the president nominated the first U.S. Ambassador to Cuba in over 50 years after the reopening of embassies in Washington and Havana.

And U.S. commerficial flights to Cuba have become frequent, if not abundant, with Jetblue being the airline to first land in Cuba after 50 years of strained relations.