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Senate Approves Easing of Curbs on Cuba Travel

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 23 — In a firm rebuke to President Bush over Cuba policy, the Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly voted to ease travel restrictions on Americans seeking to visit the island.

The 59-to-38 vote came two weeks after Mr. Bush, in a Rose Garden ceremony, announced that he would tighten the travel ban on Cuba in an attempt to halt illegal tourism there and to bring more pressure on the government of Fidel Castro.

The House of Representatives has repeatedly passed legislation to ease the travel ban, including a vote of 227 to 188 last month approving virtually identical language. But in previous efforts, the House leadership has been able to use back-room maneuvers to bottle it up. Thursday's vote was the first time the Senate had acted to loosen the ban, which is in the form of a prohibition on spending more than a token amount of money in Cuba. Advertisement

The Senate vote placed the president and Republican Congressional leaders on a collision course, leaving an angry White House threatening to veto an important spending bill that contained the provision easing the travel restrictions and a growing number of lawmakers from both parties demanding an overhaul of the American sanctions against Havana.

In the final dash to approve sweeping appropriations bills, it remains uncertain whether the White House threat is a negotiating ploy and whether supporters of looser travel restrictions could muster a two-thirds majority to override a veto.

The vote also highlighted a widening split between two important Republican constituencies: farm-state Republicans, who oppose trade sanctions in general or are eager to increase sales to Cuba, and Cuban-American leaders, who want to curb travel and trade to punish Mr. Castro. The White House views Cuban-Americans as essential to Mr. Bush's re-election prospects in Florida.

The Senate last rejected an easing of travel restrictions in 1999, by a vote of 43 to 55. But in an indication of how much the political and policy pendulum has swung, 13 senators who voted against easing the curbs four years ago switched sides and voted for it on Thursday.

Several influential Republican senators voted against the president, including John W. Warner of Virginia, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee; and Pat Roberts of Kansas, the chairman of the intelligence committee; as did many conservatives from farming states, including James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma, Sam Brownback of Kansas and Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas.

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Senator Michael B. Enzi, a Wyoming Republican who co-sponsored the amendment, criticized what he called an American "stranglehold" on Cuba, a country of 11 million people less than 100 miles from the United States. The decades-old travel ban, he said, merely deepens Cubans' misery without providing fresh ideas to the Marxist-led nation.

"Unilateral sanctions stop not just the flow of goods, but the flow of ideas," Mr. Enzi said. "Ideas of freedom and democracy are the keys to positive change in any nation."

The White House countered that allowing unfettered travel to Cuba would provide Mr. Castro's government with an economic bonanza, allowing him to cover up his shortcomings as a repressive dictator.

On Oct. 10, Mr. Bush defended tight restrictions, saying American tourist dollars go to the Cuban government, which "pays the workers a pittance in worthless pesos and keeps the hard currency to prop up the dictator and his cronies."

"Illegal tourism perpetuates the misery of the Cuban people," he said.

Mr. Bush pledged to step up enforcement of the travel ban, by increasing inspections of travelers and shipments to and from Cuba. The Department of Homeland Security immediately announced that it would direct "intelligence and investigative resources" to identify travelers or businesses that circumvent the sanctions against Cuba.

The president's statement represented the first substantive response to a mounting outcry among some Cuban exile groups over Mr. Castro's imprisonment of about 75 Cuban dissidents last spring.

But Mr. Bush's adherence to a hard-line policy identified with the most conservative exile groups has increasingly left him at odds with Congress. In 2000, lawmakers, under pressure from the farm lobby, approved the limited sale of food and medicines to the island; since then, Cuba has bought \$282 million in agricultural goods, according to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

The Senate vote was on an amendment to the \$90 billion spending bill for the Treasury and Transportation Departments. A senior administration official said the president's advisers would recommend that he veto the bill if it emerges from a House-Senate conference committee with the amendment still in it.

Advocates of easing restrictions said they had taken steps to prevent the travel measure from being stripped away again in conference committee. They cited the lopsided Senate vote supporting it.

With food and medical sales authorized on a case-by-case basis, the travel ban is one of the last remaining pillars of the trade embargo, which was first imposed by President Kennedy in 1962.

Before then, Cuba's sandy beaches and Spanish colonial architecture had made it a popular tourist spot for Americans. In recent years, it has become so again, to the chagrin of administration officials. As many as 25,000 Americans visited Cuba without authorization from the Treasury Department last year, according to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council. About 140,000 Americans, mostly Cuban exiles on family visits, traveled to the island legally, the council said.

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The legislation approved by the House last month and the Senate today does not officially legalize travel to the island. Rather, it strips the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control of its ability to enforce the travel restrictions.

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