

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. ENDS 'NO-VISA' ERA FOR CUBAN ÉMIGRÉS

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January 12, 2017

WASHINGTON—President Barack Obama on Thursday ended a longstanding policy that allows Cuban émigrés who reach U.S. soil without visas to stay in the country and apply for a green card after one year, shoring up his bid to normalize relations.

The special exception for Cuban immigrants—known as the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy—has been in place since the 1990s. It allows Cubans who make it to U.S. soil to stay, while those caught in transit are sent back.

Those who were permitted to remain under the policy also were eligible to receive benefits the U.S. grants to refugees fleeing persecution, including cash assistance and health coverage.

“By taking this step, we are treating Cuban migrants the same way we treat migrants from other countries. The Cuban government has agreed to accept the return of Cuban nationals who have been ordered removed, just as it has been accepting the return of migrants interdicted at sea,” Mr. Obama said in a statement.

The policy, which essentially encourages Cubans to flee their country, has long been one of the economic, immigration and foreign-policy tools used by Washington, and has been opposed by Havana, which considers it a drain on its resources. No other immigrants are provided similar concessions.

Mr. Obama also ended a policy that encouraged Cuban doctors practicing overseas to defect.

Mr. Obama’s decision to reverse the policy a week before he leaves office marks one of his final moves to solidify the effort he began in 2014 to restore U.S. relations with Cuba. Putting Cubans on an equal footing with immigrants from other countries would be a sign of more normalized relations. It is also a step the Cuban government has wanted the White House to take.

The wet-foot, dry-foot policy grew out of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. Under the law, the U.S. government has discretion to treat Cuban immigrants differently from those from other countries. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the number of Cubans trying to leave Cuba skyrocketed, resulting in often dangerous flotilla escapes. In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton spearheaded a policy change that provided that anyone caught at sea would be sent back to Cuba.

The change follows talks between Havana and Washington, and the two capitals issued a joint statement. As of Thursday, Cubans who arrive illegally in the U.S. will be subject to deportation, but the U.S. will still accept asylum requests, as with citizens from any other country.

The Cuban government as part of the deal agreed to take back those who come to the U.S. illegally, but U.S. officials said Cuba needs to update its older laws to normalize immigration policies between the two countries. The Obama administration on Thursday also called on Congress to repeal the 1966 U.S. law.

Deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes said the U.S. granted parole to about 40,000 Cubans in fiscal year 2015 and about 54,000 in fiscal year 2016.

The move by Mr. Obama is likely to win support from some of the fiercest critics of his opening to Cuba, such as Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) and Rep. Carlos Curbelo (R., Fla.), who have criticized the policy as a drain on federal benefits programs.

Mr. Trump, who has urged building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, has spoken frequently of the need to curtail immigration, but also has criticized the move to normalize U.S.-Cuban relations.

Cuban officials have long blasted the law as a move that promotes dangerous and illegal attempts to leave the island. "It's a totally murderous law that has promoted death on the high seas and is out of sync with international standards," a Cuban official said.

But, ironically, the end of the wet-foot/dry-foot provision should increase pressure on the island's government to implement economic reform measures, analysts said.

"This partially closes Cuba's escape valve," says Pedro Freyre, the chair of the international practice group of law firm Akerman LLP, "and will put pressure on Cubans to move forward more rapidly with reforms."

For years, said Mr. Freyre, the last resort for Cubans frustrated with the lack of opportunity on the island has been to hire a "lanchero," or people smuggler, and attempt to reach the U.S. "Now they will have to look inward to see what they can do to fix Cuba."

Sen. Bob Menendez (D., N.J.), a critic of Mr. Obama's Cuba opening, faulted the Obama administration for not consulting with Congress about the change.

"To be sure, today's announcement will only serve to tighten the noose the Castro regime continues to have around the neck of its own people," Mr. Menendez said in a statement opposing the move. "Congress was not consulted prior to this abrupt policy announcement with just nine days left in this administration."

Jorge Mas, president of the Cuban American National Foundation, welcomed the change and said it would pressure the Cuban government to improve conditions on the island.

"They've always used the excuse of the U.S. immigration problem as something that has caused their problems," said Mr. Mas, whose organization supports some of Mr. Obama's policies but doesn't back an end to the embargo without human rights improvements.