

Seattle women bound for Cuba in defiance of law

By George Estrada
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Cindy Domingo has been to Cuba a dozen times, but hopes she isn't pushing her luck too far for her 13th trip, when she'll travel without U.S. government permission to protest tight new restrictions on visiting the communist country. Domingo, a longtime Seattle activist dedicated to humanitarian and feminist causes, will accompany three other Seattle-area women on the July 21 trip and expects to join hundreds of other defiant travelers in a "travel challenge."

For U.S. citizens, traveling to Cuba requires a license issued by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, a document that has recently become much more difficult to obtain. In protest, Domingo and her fellow travelers are ignoring the process.

"We want to let the U.S. government know that we have the right to travel to Cuba without their permission," said Domingo, an aide to King County Councilman Larry Gossett. "I'm uncertain what we'll face at the border. But I'm also excited to be joining hundreds of others who'll be going without licenses."

Cuba remains under a decades-long trade embargo imposed by the United States. Laws that have been in place since 1963 outlaw tourist travel, but permit limited visits to Cuba by journalists, educators, humanitarian aid workers, representatives of religious organizations, and people visiting relatives. All applications are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Since 2003, fewer applications have been approved, Domingo said. Many groups and individuals who have been routinely approved in the past found their applications being denied, she said. Visiting relatives have been restricted to one visit every three years, a policy spelled out in the law, but previously not enforced.

Domingo has been an active organizer for women's rights since attending the U.N. International Conference on Women in 1995. She sees Cuba as the site of great progress for women in labor, medicine and farming. She gave presentations at international conferences in Havana in the previous two years.

Diana Esperas, 33, a gardener and activist from Kirkland, will be making her first trip to Cuba with the Seattle contingent. She said the group will visit a community gardens, a maternity center, and the Che Guevara Memorial, among other places. Esperas also expressed some anxiety about traveling without a license.

"My daughter asked, 'What if you get arrested, mom?'" Esperas said. "So, yes, I'm a little nervous about it, but I feel that fighting for our rights is something that needs to be done."

The U.S. Treasury Department spokeswoman Molly Millerwise wouldn't comment on a particular group or individual, but she noted that unlicensed travelers might face civil and criminal penalties.

"It is the responsibility of all U.S. persons to abide by U.S. law," Millerwise said.

Criminal penalties for violators range from 10 years in prison, \$1 million in corporate fines and \$250,000 in individual fines.

Cuba remains on the State Department's list of terrorism sponsors, and last month the House of Representatives voted down a proposal that would have eased trade restrictions against the island nation.

After the vote, U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., denounced Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

"How can we think about easing restrictions against this monster when he continues to plunder and terrorize 11 million of our brothers and sisters? The Congress should not be making life easier for the brutal Castro regime."

Critics of American foreign policy cite the U.S. trade embargo as a primary reason for Cuba's economic problems.

The Seattle women plan to fly to Toronto, and then to Havana. On their return, they will fly back to Toronto, then cross the border Aug. 1 at Buffalo, N.Y., along with members of other activist groups, including Pastors for Peace and the Venceremos Brigade.

Domingo is one of the leaders of the U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration, a national organization that seeks to change U.S. policy toward Cuba and promote the country as a model for women's rights and economic justice.

This trip to Cuba will be the 15th for Jan Strout, 57, of Seattle, one of the co-founders of the group.

"I'm a bit nervous," Strout said. "My mother is more nervous because she's worried that her daughter might be prosecuted by our government. But I'm very excited to be part of a growing movement. It's very exciting to do something for the things you believe in — democracy and freedom."