

U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc.

New York, New York

Telephone (917) 453-6726 • E-mail: council@cubatrade.org

Internet: <http://www.cubatrade.org> • Twitter: @CubaCouncil

Facebook: www.facebook.com/uscubatradeandeconomiccouncil

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/u-s--cuba-trade-and-economic-council-inc-

Facing Extinction Like The *Javan Rhino*? Non-United States Financial Institutions Willing To Engage With U.S. And Non-U.S. Entities For Transactions Involving Cuba

A CFO, “We Have A US\$10,000.00 Transaction From The U.S. To Cuba And A US\$10,000.00 From Cuba To U.S. If We Make A Mistake, A Potential US\$14.7 Million OFAC Penalty. Should We Do It? What, Am I Nuts?”

Number Of Financial Institutions In The United States Processing Cuba-Related Transactions Remains Less Than Inspiring- And Harmful For Those Engaging In Authorized Transactions. Since 2015, Two Financial Institutions Have Included Cuba

An increasing number of financial institutions located in third countries are refusing to process transactions which include a sender located in the Republic of Cuba or a recipient located in the Republic of Cuba.

This posture has metastasized despite the presentation by the sender or recipient of authorizations and opinions from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the United States Department of the Treasury, Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) of the United States Department of Commerce, and Office of the Legal Adviser (OLA) at the United States Department of State. Why?

- The fear of the cost for an unintentional violation of OFAC transaction compliance regulations
- The inclusion by the OFAC in violation settlement agreements with financial institutions and companies of both the value of the agreed upon financial settlement and the statutory maximum civil monetary penalty.

*Why is the value of the agreed upon financial settlement and the statutory maximum civil monetary penalty problematic? Because the statutory maximum monetary penalties in four most recent Republic of Cuba-connected OFAC violations were **35, 89, 266, and 1,473** times the actual imposed monetary penalty.*

It is those multipliers which serves as a financial *Sword of Damocles*, a disincentive for an increasing number of financial institutions from willingness to engage with Republic of Cuba-related transactions regardless of assurances from the United States government. *For example:*

- The OFAC fined a United States-based company US\$116,048.60 for a violation according to the OFAC “*self-disclosed... and constituting a non-egregious case.*” According to the OFAC, the “*statutory maximum civil monetary penalty applicable in this matter is US\$4,062,841.00.*”
- The OFAC fined a Switzerland-based company US\$720,258.00 for a violation “*self-disclosed... and constituting a non-egregious case.*” According to the OFAC, the “*statutory maximum civil monetary penalty applicable in this matter is US\$64,062,841.00.*”

U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc.

- The OFAC fined a Monaco-based financial institution subsidiary of a France-based financial institution US\$401,039.00 for a violation “*self-disclosed... and constituting a non-egregious case.*” According to the OFAC, the “*statutory maximum civil monetary penalty applicable in this matter is US\$106,853,346.00.*”
- The OFAC fined a United States-based company “*that provides an online virtual currency exchange and hosted wallet services*” US\$24,280,829.20 for 116,421 apparent violations. “*The statutory maximum civil monetary penalty applicable in this matter is US\$35,773,364,108.57. OFAC determined that the Apparent Violations were not voluntarily self-disclosed and were non-egregious. Accordingly, under OFAC’s Economic Sanctions Enforcement Guidelines (“Enforcement Guidelines”), the base civil monetary penalty amount applicable in this matter equals the applicable schedule amount, which is US\$485,616,584.00. The settlement amount of US\$24,280,829.20 reflects OFAC’s consideration of the General Factors under the Enforcement Guidelines.*”

What’s The Solution For Non-United States-Based Financial Institutions?

For non-United States-based financial institutions, the **Biden-Harris Administration** (2021-) would need to direct the OFAC reinstate what had been authorized prior to 2019 when the **Trump-Pence Administration** (2017-2021) reversed a 2015 decision of the **Obama-Biden Administration** (2009-2017).

“**U-turn**” transactions were authorized by the OFAC for financial institutions to process United States Dollar transactions relating to the Republic of Cuba provided they originated and terminated outside the United States and neither the originator nor the beneficiary were persons subject to United States jurisdiction. Thus, along with the absence of direct correspondent banking, there are two layers of impediments to sending, delivering, and settlement of fund transfers.

What’s The Solution For United States-Based Financial Institutions?

For non-United States-based financial institutions, the OFAC would also need to reinstate U-turn transactions along with authorizing Republic of Cuba government-operated financial institutions to have **Correspondent Accounts** with United States-based financial institutions.

By United States law and by regulation, the implementation of Direct Correspondent Banking requires transparency by the participating United States-based financial institution and transparency by the non-United States-based financial institution. Activity must comply with regulations of the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (**FinCEN**) of the United States Department of the Treasury and provisions of the 2001 USA Patriot Act. If the government of the Republic of Cuba accepts Direct Correspondent Banking, a result will be an increased transparency, accountability, and efficiency for financial institution operations within in the Republic of Cuba.

In 2016, the OFAC authorized United States-based financial institutions to have correspondent accounts with Republic of Cuba government-operated financial institutions. However, the OFAC did not authorize Republic of Cuba government-operated financial institutions to have correspondent accounts with United States-based financial institutions.

Officials of the Obama-Biden Administration refused to provide an explanation as to the basis for their decision and to this day officials of the Biden-Harris Administration maintain that same silence.

U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc.

The result of their decision required all transactions authorized by United States laws (1992 Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) and 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSREEA), regulations, and policies to travel to and from third countries. The consequences have included inefficiency, increased cost, less transparency, and a financial windfall for financial institutions in third countries who receive a fee for every transaction.

The TSREEA re-authorized the exports of agricultural commodities and food products on a cash-in-advance only basis. TSREEA exports value since the first transaction in December 2001, exceed US\$6.8 billion. The CDA re-authorized exports of healthcare products (medical equipment, medical instruments, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals) with payment terms and financing authorized. CDA exports value since 2003 exceeds US\$30.5 million.

For perspective, since 1992, the value of these third-country transactions exceeds **US\$7 billion-not including the value of annual electronically-delivered remittances-** which have been estimated to range up to US\$1 billion on an annual basis.

U.S. Banks Doing What

In 2015, Pompano Beach, Florida-based **Stonegate Bank** (2017 assets approximately US\$2.9 billion) acquired accounts for the Embassy of the Republic of Cuba in Washington, DC, and the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Cuba to the United Nations in New York after Buffalo, New York-based **M&T Bank Corporation** (2021 assets approximately US\$150 billion) notified the embassy and mission that it would no longer provide services due to challenges with regulatory compliance for many accounts with embassies and missions.

Stonegate Bank was also approved for a correspondent account at Banco Internacional de Comercia SA (**BICSA**), a member of Republic of Cuba government-operated Grupo Nuevo Banca SA, created by Corporate Charter No. 49 in 1993 and commenced operation in 1994.

According to the Republic of Cuba, "Its [BICSA] main activity is 'enterprises' bank' carried through its central services and five branches based in the country's capital, Santiago de Cuba and Villa Clara. It records all transactions in real time providing its customers with card and remote banking services while it is working on developing other methods of electronic banking. Its institutional clients, national or foreign, receive a complete accounting and documentary service, while national entities also enjoy of significant volumes of credit facilities. Practically all sectors of the economy benefit from all this, such as that of agriculture, the food industry, the basic and light industries, transportation, aviation, fishing, construction, domestic and foreign trade, the iron and steel industry, sugar, informatics, communications and others with not only economic importance but also social, such as health, water supply, education, culture and sports. Credit policy followed by the Bank is dictated in a collegiate way by its Credit Committee on the basis of a strict analysis and control in loan making. The Bank counts on correspondents in the five continents, the majority are first class banks, mainly Europeans and Americans. Equity capital of shareholders (Grupo Nueva Banca with the biggest share and Bancholding), near the USD95 millions with a balance ranging from 550 to 600 millions, make sure the Bank has a strong solvency ratio."

Without explanation the Obama-Biden Administration did not authorize BICSA under a license from the OFAC to have a correspondent account at Stonegate Bank, so Stonegate Bank routed transactions for approximately eighty (80) customers on a regular basis through Panama City, Panama-based **Multibank** (2019 assets approximately US\$5 billion) which had dealings with the Republic of Cuba.

U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc.

However, on 16 June 2020, Bogota, Colombia-based **Grupo Aval** (2021 assets approximately US\$110 billion) reported that “*On May 25th, Banco de Bogotá, through its subsidiary Leasing Bogotá S.A. Panamá, acquired 96.6% of the ordinary shares of Multi Financial Group [Multibank]. As part of the acquisition process, MFG’s operation in Cuba was closed and as part of the transaction. Grupo Aval complies with OFAC regulations and doesn’t have transactional relationships with Cuba.*”

In 2017, Conway, Arkansas-based Home BancShares (2021 assets approximately US\$18 billion) through its subsidiary *Centennial Bank* purchased Stonegate Bank. Stonegate Bank operations were absorbed into *Centennial Bank*.

In June 2022, Chicago, Illinois-based Chicago, Illinois-based **First American Bank** (2021 assets approximately US\$6 billion) acquired from *Centennial Bank* an operating account (and Republic of Cuba-focused branch personnel) for the Embassy of the Republic of Cuba in Washington, DC. First American Bank is seeking a correspondent account with BICSA and if BICSA is authorized by the OFAC to establish a correspondent account with First American Bank, there would be an opportunity for two-way fund transfers for authorized transactions (agricultural commodities, food products, healthcare products (medical equipment, medical instruments, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, informational materials, travel (visa processing, overflight fees, landing fees, accommodation payments- Airbnb, etc.), remittances, entrepreneurial activities (direct investment to and direct financing for privately-owned companies located in the Republic of Cuba, etc.).