

Cuba travel rules protested

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Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Seventeen U.S. senators have joined more than 100 members of the House of Representatives to protest Treasury Department rules that have blocked some religious organizations from traveling to Cuba.

Religious leaders attended a Capitol Hill meeting called by the members of Congress who had sent word of their concerns about the policy changes to Treasury Secretary John Snow.

“We are dismayed, and even outraged, at the loss of these licenses and what we view as unjustified interference in and hindrance to the mission of the church,” said John McCullough, executive director and CEO of Church World Service.

Some of the affected groups have traveled to the communist island nation for more than a decade, meeting with partner churches and attending conferences. Those affected include the National Council of Churches, the American Baptist Churches USA and the Alliance of Baptists, which no longer have licenses, and organizations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) which now has a more restrictive license.

Representatives of the Treasury and State departments attended the meeting, and religious leaders delivered letters to Snow and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed by a dozen officials of religious groups. The letters state the groups believe Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control is un-fairly granting less restrictive licenses to local churches in the U.S. than the ones national organizations have.

"Any premise that the U.S. government is favoring a particular religious group over another is categorically wrong," Treasury spokeswoman Molly Millerwise said when asked about the concerns.

The office issuing the licenses is continuing to grant them but is trying to be certain that "legitimate religious travel" occurs, she explained.

"This policy also helps to ensure that those simply looking for R&R on the island are no longer able to line Castro's pockets under the pretext of religious travel," Millerwise said.

The religious leaders strongly denied that their groups had misused licenses and asked Snow to address those that might have.

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