

U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana has no electricity

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WASHINGTON - The Cuban government has cut off electricity to the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana as part of a sharp increase in harassments that include holding up visas for American diplomats waiting to take up posts there and restricting gasoline supplies, the State Department said Monday.

The electricity to the U.S. Interests Section in Havana -- not quite an embassy because Cuba and the United States do not have formal diplomatic relations -- was cut off at 3 a.m. on June 5, said Ashley Morris, a State Department spokeswoman

Although electricity in Cuba is notoriously unreliable, Morris said no other buildings around the Interests Section on Havana's seaside Malecón boulevard have been affected, so U.S. officials believe the cutoff is deliberate.

Asked if the Cuban government had given any reason for the cutoff, Morris said, "you'll have to ask the Cubans. We'd like to know as well."

The latest Cuban harassments were first reported in today's El Nuevo Herald.

U.S. officials also confirmed that diplomatic personnel in Havana have started destroying some documents that are not essential, but called that a standard procedure when power to a diplomatic facility is cut.

Morris said the Interests Section continues to "operate under normal procedures" by using its own generators. However, officials said access to gasoline has been restricted and the mission has been unable to import any equipment, including vehicles and computers.

Water is still supplied to the main Interests Section building but is sporadically available in the mission's annex, where visa applications are processed.

Harassment of U.S. diplomats in Havana is nothing new.

A 2002 cable from the U.S. Interests Section, obtained by The Miami Herald, detailed a campaign of nuisance attacks that even left human feces at the homes of diplomats posted in Cuba.

The three-page cable said alarms were set off in the middle of the night outside diplomats' homes, keeping them and their families from getting any rest. Phones would ring all night and "cell phones ring every half hour for no apparent reason."

U.S. diplomats who regularly met with Cuban dissidents were specially targeted, the cable said. Their car tires were slashed, windows smashed, insides "pilfered" and radios set to pro-Castro stations.

Their homes sometimes were broken into, leaving doors and windows open and "leaving not-so-subtle 'messages' . . . including unwelcome calling cards like urine and feces." The State Department at the time called the campaign "a psychological operation" to which spouses and children were not immune.

"In one example that demonstrates how regime officials actually listen to the daily activities of the staff, presumably through electronic bugs, shortly after one family discussed the susceptibility of their daughter

to mosquito bites, they returned home to find all of their windows open and the house full of mosquitoes," the report said.

Former U.S. Interests Section chief Wayne Smith, now a critic of U.S. policies on Cuba, says that kind of campaign is triggered by provocation - like the electronic billboard that the U.S. mission hung on the side of its building earlier this year to show anti-Castro messages.

``If they are doing it for a short period of time, that's one thing. If they cut off the water and electricity indefinitely, it goes on for several days, that's when you get into very serious stuff. That's when the United States will begin to think of withdrawing."

Smith said cutting off the lights was "foolish" and "counterproductive" because it would play into the hands of conservative Bush administration officials who he believes would like nothing more than to abandon the Havana post.

During Smith's tenure in Havana, a group of former political prisoners stormed the Interests Section demanding to know when they would be allowed to travel to the United States. With the Mariel boatlift in full swing and tensions high in Havana, a bus load of pro-government thugs showed up to beat the former prisoners.