

Shuffle of U.S. officials affects Cuba

Key State Department officials in charge of Cuban affairs are moving to Iraq amid a government reshuffle involving Cuba and Latin America.

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WASHINGTON --Two top officers on the State Department's Cuba desk are moving to Iraq, adding to a government reshuffle involving a total of six key Cuba posts.

Stephen McFarland, who heads the Cuba desk, and his number two, Timothy Zuniga-Brown will join the Iraqi provincial reconstruction teams, which operate outside Baghdad's Green Zone and are considered dangerous for U.S. personnel.

The changes come as Cuban leader Fidel Castro remains largely out of public view after having temporarily handed power to his younger brother Raúl due to health troubles.

U.S. officials say there is nothing unusual about those departures or the changes in other U.S. agencies.

The top tier of government that sets Cuba policy is unchanged, the officials emphasize.

"It is just rotation stuff," says Eric Watnik, a spokesman for the Western Hemisphere department at the State Department, noting that McFarland and Zuniga-Brown had completed two years in their jobs and volunteered for the Iraqi positions.

John Regan, the Cuba desk's No. 3, will head the desk until the replacements arrive this summer, Watnik said.

Adolfo Franco, the U.S. Agency for International Development assistant administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean, is also leaving to join Sen. John McCain's presidential campaign. To replace him the White House has nominated Paul J. Bonicelli, the current deputy assistant administrator for the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance at USAID.

David Mutchler, the USAID director for Cuba -- a position also subject to regular rotation, is finishing his term in the job and will leave this summer, said Morgan D. Ortagus, a USAID press officer.

Norman Bailey, the Cuba and Venezuela coordinator for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which coordinates intelligence-gathering among 16 U.S. agencies, was asked to leave when new ODNI director Mike McConnell took over earlier this year. A search for a replacement is under way.

Also deployed to the Iraq-Afghanistan region is a civilian analyst for the Miami-based U.S. Southern Command who focuses on the Caribbean, including Cuba. The analyst is an army reserve officer.

The State Department also has quietly dismantled a so-called war-room where five interagency task forces gathered to closely track events in Cuba after Castro announced he was suffering from an undisclosed intestinal ailment on July 31.

The five groups are continuing to operate, though not in the same physical location, Watnik said.

Three of the groups are headed by the State Department: diplomatic actions, strategic communications and democratic promotion.

A group that coordinates humanitarian aid to Cuba is run by the Commerce Department, and a fifth, on migration issues, is run by the National Security Council and the Department of Homeland Security.

The upper echelons of the administration that decide the course of Cuba policy remain unchanged.

The two key Cabinet officers most involved in Cuba are Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, a Cuban-American.