

Cuba says U.S. deliberately behind on visas

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WASHINGTON --

Cuba said Tuesday the United States has fallen behind in the number of visas allotted for Cubans, suggesting this was a deliberate attempt by the Bush administration to stir trouble on the island.

Cuba's foreign ministry said the United States had only awarded 10,724 visas in the nine-month period ending June 30, or 54 percent of the 20,000 annual quota of visas agreed to in the 1994 migration accords.

A U.S. failure to meet its quota would be a "grave and unjustifiable" violation of the agreements, according to a statement published in Tuesday's edition of the Communist Party Granma newspaper.

The United States and Cuba have often traded allegations that the other uses migration for political ends, but the matter is especially sensitive now, after a sick Fidel Castro handed power to his brother Raúl last summer - setting the stage for the first leadership transition in nearly half a century.

The migration accords were designed to discourage illegal crossings of the Florida Straits by providing a safe way for Cubans to leave, but Cuba now suggests the Bush administration is deliberately slowing the process.

The Cuba statement asks whether President Bush's desire for change on the island was behind the delay in granting visas, "even though this provokes a situation of instability that would almost surely also affect the United States."

The foreign ministry said the United States should stop "the manipulation of the migration issue with political ends" and criticized Washington's policy of allowing Cubans who make it to the U.S. mainland to stay while returning those caught at sea, a policy known as "wet-foot, dry-foot."

Presumably, fewer visas could result in more Cubans taking to the sea to reach the United States.