

# U.S. puts Dominican club off limits, alleges race bias

## In the Dominican Republic, the U.S. Embassy has ordered employees not to patronize a nightclub that reportedly discriminates against blacks.

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The U.S. embassy in the Dominican Republic has barred its employees from a popular Santo Domingo disco, saying the nightclub routinely shuts its doors to blacks.

Roland Bullen, the embassy chargé d'affaires, made the announcement Monday after three black embassy employees were denied entrance to the Loft club July 22. The reason: one of the black women in the group wore braids.

"I make this decision with great reluctance," Bullen said in a statement. "It is rare for an embassy to place a popular entertainment venue off-limits to its employees. But we condemn such discrimination, which violates Dominican law and U.S. norms."

### THORNY ISSUE

Nightclub admission for dark-skinned people has long been a thorny issue in the Dominican Republic, where many people are descendants of African slaves. The country has a bitter history of resentment toward neighboring Haiti, which many black people say manifests itself in discrimination against dark-skinned people.

One Dominican woman was shot and killed by a club bouncer in September after she argued with him for refusing to let her black friends enter. And an Afro-Dominican academic said he was so furious at having been refused entry at night clubs that he recently brought a camera to film bouncers as they opened their doors only for lighter-skinned patrons.

The U.S. embassy has heard the same kinds of complaints for years, as African American foreign service workers and U.S. Marines were regularly rejected.

"We'd go out in a group, black and white, and the white people would get in and they'd say to us, 'Oh no, we're full,'" said Tawnie McNeil, an African American who served as cultural attaché at the U.S. embassy 2003-2005. "I would say, 'Really? You just let 20 white people in.' And they'd say, 'well, we're full *now*.'"

McNeil, now posted in Tijuana, said she wrote memos to her superiors, but no action was taken.

"It personally happened to me 10 to 15 times. I finally stopped going out," she said. "I will never ever go to that country again, and I advise all the black people I know not to go there either. It's a difficult and confusing issue and hard to understand. But after two years there, I was no longer interested in understanding."

Embassy spokesman Rex Moser said black employees have complained many times about several clubs, and the July 22 incident at Loft was "the straw that broke the camel's back."

Senior embassy officials met with owners of several Santo Domingo clubs as far back as two years ago, Moser said. "They give a different excuse every time: 'You are not on the guest list. You are not dressed right,'" Moser said. "It's an act of racial discrimination -- an overt act. At some point, the embassy felt it needed to take a stand."

### APOLOGY OFFERED

Loft owner Ray Santos told The Miami Herald he will send a letter offering the embassy "a million apologies" -- and will include photos of his black customers dancing and having fun.

"They are saying we are racists who discriminate against Afro-Americans, and that's not true," Santos said in a telephone interview from Santo Domingo.

"From what I understand, one of the girls was poorly dressed and had strange braids on her head. She wasn't dressed as well as the others in her group or the people inside."

Santos, like chargé d'affaires Bullen, is black.

"I am black, my father is black and all the people who work here are black," he said. "In the Dominican Republic, we're all people of color."

The bouncer, he said, has been reassigned.