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Carnival Says Cuban-Born Passengers Can Join Cuba Cruise

By Jacob Gershman
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Carnival on Monday said it would allow Cuban-born passengers to board its historic cruises to Cuba, announcing a change in policy after protesters and a lawsuit accused the company of discrimination.

The company said it might be forced to delay its voyages to the island unless Cuba's governmenilt softens its travel restrictions against Cuban nationals.

The Associated Press reports:

Carnival CEO Arnold Donald said in a written statement that the cruise line is continuing negotiations with Cuba aimed at resolving the issue prior to a scheduled May 1 cruise by its Fathom brand from Miami to Cuba — the first such sail in more than 50 years that is part of the ongoing thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations.

The 704-passenger Adonia plans to sail every other week to three Cuban ports: Havana, Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba.

The decision follows protests last week by Cuban-Americans outside Carnival's headquarters in the suburb of Doral. Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez — who was born in Cuba — also suggested in a letter that Carnival might be violating the county's human rights ordinance by discriminating against a specific class of people.

In addition, two Cuban-Americans who were prevented from buying tickets on the May 1 cruise because they were born in Cuba filed a potential class-action civil rights lawsuit in Miami federal court last week. And Secretary of State John Kerry said during a visit to Miami on Friday that Cuba should change its policy and that Carnival nevertheless should allow anyone to travel on its ships.

"We want everyone to be able to go to Cuba with us," Carnival CEO Arnold Donald said in a statement Monday. "We remain excited about this historic opportunity to give our guests an extraordinary vacation experience in Cuba."

The federal lawsuit filed in the Southern District of Florida accuses the world's largest cruise-ship company and its new Fathom subsidiary of unlawful national-origin discrimination in a public place of accommodation. Law firm Kozyak Tropin Throckmorton LLP is representing the plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

"It has been 58 years since I visited my native country, and I was looking forward to planning a surprise trip with my three children," wrote one of the plaintiffs, Francisco Marty, in sworn statement filed April 15. "Sadly, Carnival will not allow my Cuban-born daughter and I to go on this ship only because we were born in Cuba. I feel as though I am being treated as a second-class citizen."

The exclusion of Cuban-born passengers had also drawn a rebuke from the Cuban American Bar Association.

Carnival won U.S. Treasury Department approval for the trips in July last year, days after U.S. and Cuba announced a resumption of diplomatic ties.