

**Testimony of Senior Bureau Official Francisco L. Palmieri**  
**before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western**  
**Hemisphere on “Attacks Against U.S. Diplomats in Cuba: Response and**  
**Oversight”**  
**January 9, 2018**

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak about the attacks against U.S. diplomats in Cuba and the Department of State’s efforts in response. At the outset, I want to thank you for your concern for the safety and security of our diplomatic personnel in Havana. As you know, that is Secretary Tillerson’s top priority. It is mine as well.

I am pleased to be here today with my colleagues from the Bureau of Diplomatic Security and the Bureau of Medical Services, with whom the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs has worked closely on this complex issue.

I would also like to emphasize up front that the investigation into these health attacks is ongoing. I understand that there are ongoing discussions within the committee regarding this matter, and the fact is, there is still much we do not know, including who or what is behind the injuries to our personnel. We have the best experts in the government and the private sector working to help us understand it. At every step in our response to these events, we have worked closely with our medical and technical experts in evaluating health conditions and the nature of the attacks.

I will walk you through a general timeline, which will describe our diplomatic engagement with the Cubans on this issue, and review many of the actions we have taken to date. Then, I will defer to my colleagues to address the security and medical issues.

In late 2016, some members of our diplomatic community serving at U.S. Embassy Havana complained about hearing strange noises and a variety of unexplained physical symptoms. As the Department investigated, we began to see signs suggesting that these events – initially in diplomatic residences, and later, at hotels – may have begun as early as November 2016.

As soon as we identified a pattern connecting these unusual events with certain health symptoms, U.S. officials approached the Cuban government in mid-February to demand it meet its obligations under the Vienna Convention to protect

our personnel. The Cubans denied involvement, offered their cooperation, and opened their own investigation. Since then we have engaged the Cubans more than 20 times, from the working level to the highest level of the Cuban government, both here in Washington and in Havana.

In addition to our diplomatic efforts, we prioritized the medical care of our personnel. State Department and private medical experts examined more than 80 post employees and their families, both in the United States and in Havana. Dr. Rosenfarb will provide you with additional details.

Separately, we launched a government-wide effort to find the cause and culprits behind these attacks. Apart from the investigation, we have met with U.S. interagency partners more than a dozen times to discuss and refine our response to these attacks.

The attacks initially appeared to occur in clusters, but starting in late March, sporadic attacks continued until late April and then seemed to stop. Beginning in mid-April, we allowed anyone serving at Embassy Havana who did not feel safe at post to return to the United States. We also expelled two Cuban diplomats in May in order to underscore the Cuban government's responsibility to protect our personnel.

After a period without any attacks, there were two additional attacks reported in close proximity in late August, which were medically confirmed in September. Based on the resumption of these attacks, Secretary Tillerson ordered the departure of non-emergency personnel from post on September 29. The Secretary assessed this was the only way to significantly reduce the risk to our diplomats and their families.

As a follow-on to the Ordered Departure decision, we expelled 15 more Cuban diplomats in October to ensure equity in the impact on our respective operations and to underscore to Cuba its obligation to stop the attacks. These decisions – both to draw down our personnel at Embassy Havana and to expel Cuban diplomats – did not signal a change in policy.

Prior to the Secretary's decision to institute Ordered Departure, our Embassy held 17 town hall meetings with American staff. Since the return of U.S. diplomats to Washington, we have held a number of meetings with them. Secretary Tillerson personally met with these evacuees to explain his decision to institute Ordered Departure, and we have organized a number of meetings to address evacuees'

concerns. The well-being of the 24 confirmed victims, as well as the well-being of all of our evacuees and those remaining in Havana, continues to be our priority, as does the ongoing investigation.

With that, I will turn it to my colleagues to discuss their areas of expertise. Then I will be happy to answer your questions.