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The Cuban government is withholding exit permits for 533 Cubans who have received visas to emigrate to the United States, according to data from the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

The number includes 303 Cubans with U.S. visas and 230 people who have been claimed by relatives in the United States, the U.S. diplomatic mission's figures showed.

In the majority of cases, the exit permits have been withheld because the people involved are senior government or military officials who are viewed as defectors. More than 100 involve health professionals who can be required to work for the government several years to pay for their educations.

Unlike most countries, Cuba requires its citizens to obtain exit permits when leaving the country, both on short visits abroad or as permanent migrants. Some of those held up have been waiting more than 10 years for the permit.

Last June, for example, Rafael Díaz Rey and his wife, Nivia Valdés Gálvez, and their sons, Pablo, 15, and David, 10, left Havana's north coast aboard a boat made from a 1948 Mercury. The four had U.S. visas, but Valdés could not get a Cuban exit permit because she is a doctor.

The U.S. State Department's annual human rights report, released last week, mentioned Cuba's departure restrictions.

"Although the government allows the departure of people classified as immigrants or who have refugee status in other countries, thousands of citizens who received documents to travel abroad were denied authorization to leave last year," the report said.

The report added that the majority of those affected are doctors, nurses and other health professionals, as well as youths of military service age and political dissidents.

At least six of the 75 dissidents jailed in a massive crackdown in 2003 were later freed and received U.S. visas, but they are awaiting Cuban exit permits.

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