DEAL FOR US-CUBA FLIGHTS SEEN BY YEAR-END

News / Airports / Routes

The **United States** and **Cuba** are likely to announce agreements by **the end of the year** for restoring scheduled airline **flights** and postal service between the two countries, a senior Cuban official said.

The latest signs of progress in the thaw between the two Cold War foes emerged from talks in Washington on normalising relations following the re-establishment of diplomatic ties in July after more than a half-century of hostility.

"We are very close to the first agreements or arrangements that we could be able to announce in the next few weeks," Josefina Vidal, the Cuban Foreign Ministry's chief of US affairs and head of the Cuban delegation in the talks, told reporters at the Cuban Embassy in Washington.

She said the deals expected by the end of the year would also cover environmental protection and the fight against drug trafficking.

Vidal said, however, that while a deal on direct flights would be finalised, "when those flights will be operational, I cannot say."

A State Department official said in September that among the key issues that had to be discussed were aviation safety and security. The US Federal Aviation Administration and Transportation Security Administration must sign off on Cuba's operations. Direct charter flights have served Cuban-Americans and specialist groups for travel to Cuba for years.

The United States would also address the potential for Cuba's state-owned carrier, Cubana de

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AviaciÃ³n, to share its flight codes with US airlines and sell tickets on flights operated by US airlines, according to the US official.

Even with a flight agreement, travel to Cuba by Americans would still be limited by the US economic embargo that bans general tourism to the Communist-ruled island.

President Barack Obama, who has already used executive powers to ease trade, travel and investment restrictions on Cuba since a diplomatic breakthrough last December, has called for an end to the embargo. But only the US Congress can lift it, and the Republican majority is considered highly unlikely to do so.

The State Department said Tuesday's meeting of the so-called Bilateral Commission, the second round of such talks since the restoration of relations, "took place in a respectful, cooperative, and productive environment."

"It provided an opportunity to review progress on shared priorities, including regulatory issues, telecommunications, claims, environmental protection, human trafficking, human rights, migration, and law enforcement," it said in a statement.

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