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Cuba Cancels International Bar Association Meeting in Havana

Members of the Cuban Organizing Committee "were concerned about us not informing them in advance about our inviting the OAS secretary general," said IABA president Carlos Lopez.

by Monika Gonzalez Mesa
mgmesa@alm.com

Cuban officials abruptly canceled an Inter-American Bar Association conference in Havana, citing objections to speakers including the secretary general of the Organization of American States, organizers said.

The president of the Inter-American Bar Association called the decision 45 days ahead of the event unjustified. IABA president Carlos Lopez said more than 100 lawyers and guests had booked travel, registered for the conference or obtained Cuban visas.

The conference was moved to the InterContinental Miami hotel on the original dates of June 20-24.

The Cuban Embassy in Washington did not return calls seeking comment on the cancellation.

"Their position was to not have the conference in Cuba because they were afraid that statements against the Cuban regime and against Venezuela were going to happen in their territory," Lopez said. "They made clear that they didn't want anyone there making statements against Cuba, against Venezuela, against Brazil. They had some concerns about the press coverage."

Cuba and Venezuela have had close ties for decades, and Venezuela and Brazil have been major investors in Cuba.

OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro Lemes has been critical of Venezuelan President Nicolas

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Judge Dismisses Union Carbide in Miami Mesothelioma Case

by Celia Ampel
campel@alm.com

Asbestos mass tort litigation may have been around for more than four decades, but a Miami federal judge found room for novel decisions.

U.S. District Judge Beth Bloom corrected herself twice on jurisdiction in a case filed against Union Carbide Corp. The orders dealt in part with a 2014 U.S. Supreme Court decision still in the infancy of its interpretation across the country.

The case before Bloom was filed last year by James Waite, who

MELANIE BELL

U.S. District Judge Beth Bloom initially de-

Transformed 'Unbuildable' Lot Sells for $13M

by Carla Vianna
cvianna@alm.com

A Miami developer in need of extra parking space is walking away with $13 million three years later.

In 2013, Lyle Chariff owned the property that housed Cypress Room, now known as Cypress Tavern, an eatery on the edge of Miami's Design District and across the street from a vacant lot.

The president of Chariff Realty Group Inc. saw the empty slice of land

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CUBA

Maduro, chiding him in January for allowing party politics to shape the composition of the Supreme Court, electoral council and other oversight bodies.

The strained relations escalated Tuesday when Maduro accused Almagro Lemes of being a CIA agent. In response, Almagro Lemes on Wednesday denied the accusation and charged Maduro betrayed "the most sacred principle in politics, which is to subject yourself to the scrutiny of your people."

Almagro Lemes, a career diplomat from Uruguay, was elected OAS secretary general in March 2015 and has expressed support for Cuba to return to the OAS as a full member.

A decision was made at the last annual conference in Lima, Peru, that Havana would host the event for the first time since the 1940s, said George Harper, a senior partner at Harper Meyer Perez Hagen O'Connor Albert & Dribin in Miami.

"Everyone was enthusiastic, including the Cuban bar association," said Harper, adding he had seen members at previous IABA meetings in Brazil and Panama. "Everyone was feeling really good about it."

Members of the Cuban Organizing Committee formed to coordinate the IABA meeting "were concerned about us not informing them in advance about our inviting the OAS secretary general," Lopez said. "They knew in early March that the secretary of the OAS was going to the event, and they didn't say anything."

The Cuban organizers consisted of the Supreme Court; the National Union of Jurists of Cuba, Cuba's largest bar group; the National Organization of Collective Law Offices; the attorney general's office and the law faculty of the University of Havana, Lopez said.

"By reneging on their word, these organizations have completely disregarded the economic impact and reputational damage to our association," Lopez wrote IABA members when informing them of the site change. "During two days of intense negotiations with Cuba, we were met with utter inflexibility. Not only did our Cuban counterparts cancel the conference, they prohibited it from being held in the country."

The Washington-based IABA includes attorneys from U.S., Latin America, Canada, Spain and France. The association was founded in 1940 as a forum for lawyers to discuss and promote the rule of law in democratic institutions in the Western Hemisphere.

Lopez, an international law partner at Wolf Popper in Puerto Rico and New York, said he received a cancellation email May 5 from the Cuban Organizing Committee. The Cuban contingent didn't want to discuss the issue on the phone, so Lopez flew to Havana three days later to attempt to resurrect the meeting. Meetings lasted for hours last week. Lopez said he suggested the Cuban committee could step out of the event and allow it to go forward, but nothing changed.

The OAS secretary was not the only concern.

"We couldn't guarantee that attendees to the conference would not engage in activities of which they [the Cuban government] did not approve and which they cannot control, such as meeting with dissidents or other people that they didn't approve of," said Harper, a member of the IABA's advisory council of past presidents. "Number two, the secretary general of Organization of American States had accepted invitation to speak at the conference. They didn't want him there. ... Our conclusion is, they couldn't control what he was going to say. Third, they didn't approve of certain presentations that were going to be made, the contents of which they believed to be contrary to Cuba's best interests."

Harper said the Cuban committee has issues with two panels: one on the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, which does not include Cuba and requires countries to meet labor and human rights standards; and a panel presented by the IABA's military law committee, which is made up of military legal officers comparing how countries use their militaries to combat drug trafficking. Harper said a Cuban colonel was scheduled on the panel, but the agenda is being revised because of the logistical changes.

Some airlines and hotels have told participants that they will not give refunds, Lopez said. The association offered to assist people seeking reimbursement for expenses on the canceled Cuban meeting.

In contrast, about 120 delegates from the National Bar Association, the largest African-American U.S. bar group, are set to travel to Cuba on May 23-30, and the Florida Bar's international law section organized a trip to Cuba last August.

Monika Gonzalez Mesa can be reached at 305-347-6657.

EDITORIAL

Regional Editor-In-Chief: George Haj
ghaj@alm.com (305) 347-6648

Managing Editor: Catherine Wilson
cwilson@alm.com (305) 347-6611

Web Editor: Thomas Phillips
tphillips@alm.com

BUSINESS

Group Publisher, South: Wayne Curtis
wcurtis@alm.com (404) 419-2801

Associate Publisher / Chief Financial Officer: Jeff Fried
jfried@alm.com (305) 347-6615

Director of Field Sales, Marketing Solutions: Carlos Curbelo
ccurbelo@alm.com (305) 347-6647

Director of Products: Léon Barrocas
lbarrocas@alm.com (305) 347-6670

Director / Operations & MIS: Guillermo Garcia
ggarcia@alm.com (305) 347-6658

Vice President/Miami Legals: Octelma Ferbeyre
miamilegals@alm.com (305) 347-6614

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120 Broadway, New York, NY 10005 (212) 457-9400

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