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Russian Airlines Suspend Flights to Cuba, Evacuate Tourists Amid Fuel Crisis

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Roman Naumov/URA.RU/TASS

Two of Russia's largest airlines will suspend flights to Cuba after they evacuate Russian tourists from the island nation amid a fuel shortage caused by growing pressure from the United States.

Russia's civil aviation agency Rosaviatsia said Wednesday that Rossiya, the country's fourth-largest carrier, and Nordwind, the seventh-largest, were forced to make adjustments to their flight routes "due to challenges with refueling in Cuba."

Cuba warned airlines this weekend that jet fuel would remain unavailable for at least one month starting Tuesday as Havana imposed emergency measures to address its energy crisis.

Russia's flagship airline Aeroflot, Rossiya's parent company, said it will begin sending empty passenger planes to Havana and the popular resort town of Varadero on Thursday to fly out Russian tourists.

Nordwind issued a similar statement, saying its evacuation flights would go to the cities of Holguin and Cayo Coco.

Rosaviatsia said Rossiya would suspend flights "until the situation changes" in Cuba, while Nordwind did not specify its plans. Russian and Cuban authorities were seeking "alternative opportunities to resume flights in both directions," Rosaviatsia added.

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The flagship carrier Air Canada was among the first international airlines to suspend flights to Cuba due to a lack of guaranteed fuel supplies at the Caribbean island's airports. Other carriers were either canceling flights or requiring planes to carry enough fuel for return flights.

Cuba's jet fuel crisis and other critical energy supply disruptions follow U.S. President Donald Trump's executive order last month threatening additional tariffs on countries that sell oil to Cuba. No foreign fuel or oil tanker has arrived in Cuba in weeks, experts in maritime transport tracking told AFP.

The Kremlin has accused the U.S. of "suffocating" Cuba, an ally of Russia going back to the Soviet period.

"We're discussing possible solutions with our Cuban friends, at least to provide whatever assistance we can," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday.

Tensions between the United States and Cuba have grown in the wake of the Trump administration's shocking capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January. Venezuela has been a crucial source of oil exports to Cuba.

But Cuba had experienced rolling blackouts even before this year, as it faces its most serious economic crisis since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuba has been under a U.S. trade embargo since 1962.

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