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ACLU to fight Cuba travel ban

A new state law that restricts educational travel to Cuba and other countries faces a legal challenge.

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Florida's American Civil Liberties Union plans to file a lawsuit today to challenge a new state law that bans colleges from organizing and paying for trips to Cuba and other countries that may support terrorism.

"It's not in the overall interest of the United States for individual states to meddle in matters of foreign affairs and international security," ACLU spokesman Brandon Hensler said Monday.

The group's legal director will announce the lawsuit at an 11 a.m. news conference in Miami.

Professors from Florida International University and the University of Florida will speak about why they believe the Travel to Terrorist States Act is unconstitutional and how it could hamper education in Florida.

The law applies to both private and public colleges and universities, prohibiting private schools from spending state money to plan such travel and preventing public schools from using any money to pay for those trips.

Professors and students at private schools would need private donations to pay for travel to countries listed as sponsors of terrorism by the U.S. Department of State.

But the politician who sponsored the new law has said he is considering a bill for next year that would withhold money from schools that sponsor any trips to terrorist countries.

Besides Cuba, the U.S. government considers Iran, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria to be terrorist sponsors. Florida's educational travel ban law also applies to those nations.

State Rep. David Rivera, the Miami Republican who sponsored the bill, said he does not believe taxpayer money should go into Cuban leader Fidel Castro's pockets.

"The ACLU has hit a new low by filing a lawsuit that will aid terrorist countries," Rivera said.

"Under the Florida Constitution, the Legislature decides how taxpayer money is spent," he said. ``I've never heard of a constitutional right to spend taxpayer money in terrorist countries."

Gov. Jeb Bush signed the law last month after legislators approved it during the annual session in Tallahassee.

Rivera was prompted to push the legislation after the January arrests of FIU Professor Carlos Alvarez and his wife, Elsa, an FIU counselor. They are charged with being unregistered government agents for Cuba.

Carlos Alvarez had traveled to Cuba several times, and Rivera said the arrests highlighted the danger of allowing state employees to travel to terrorist countries.

But academic scholars have argued the ban will be a disservice to educational research and to students studying foreign policy and international relations.

Also, Hensler noted there are federal provisions in place that adequately regulate educational travel outside the United States.

He said the group is confident that its legal challenge will be successful.