

Two bands, including Venezuelan headliners, can't enter Canada for London's Sunfest

By Jane Sims, Joe Belanger, The London Free Press
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Chico Pacheco of Samba Squad comes down off the stage to get people dancing to their infectious rhythms during their traditional kickoff concert for Sunfest Thursday. The band is anchored by four strong female voices and a massive percussion section that keeps the audience rocking. (MIKE HENSEN, The London Free Press)

Global politics may have disrupted London's world music festival.

Two musical acts slated to perform at the four-day TD Sunfest in Victoria Park, including a headliner from troubled Venezuela, aren't coming.

The world-renowned salsa band, Venezuela's Dimensión Latina and the Angolan-Portuguese band Throes + The Shine, were unable to come to Canada due to visa troubles.

Dimensión Latina, considered one of the world's greatest salsa bands with millions of albums sold, was to headline the TD Sunfest bandshell at 10 p.m. Thursday. The Peruvian band, Bareto, will fill in.

"I'm so disappointed and sad," said Sunfest artistic director Alfredo Caxaj. "After months of planning and so much effort and, in the end, it doesn't happen."

It is unclear why the bands couldn't get visas, said Caxaj. But there are clues in their countries of origin.

"I'm not surprised with respect to the Venezuelan band," said Glenn Matthews, a London immigration lawyer and founder of Matthews-Global Immigration Law.

"My guess is that . . . one, some or all (members) have been affected by their deteriorating country conditions and our government's realization that if you issue a visitor visa to a Venezuelan, they're not likely going to leave Canada at the end of their stay."

Venezuela has endured recent strife as a shrinking economy, food shortages and skyrocketing inflation have caused widespread civil unrest and instability.

Matthews said performing artists with limited engagements are exempt from work permits, but must hold valid visitor visas and electronic travel authorizations (ETA).

The ETA was introduced about a year ago to do quick background checks for criminal records. It takes about three weeks to get the permits.

Immigration officials would have assessed the applications for country of origin, background and the nature of their visit. Paramount is that the applicant has a stable life at home.

And the decision is discretionary. "On a balance of probabilities, . . . if the gut feeling of a visa officer is that a particular applicant from a particular country is not likely to leave Canada, then under our act, they're not supposed to issue them a visa," Matthews said.

It's also possible a flood of applications delayed clearance for the world-famous band.

As for Throes + The Shine, the problem could have been with the Angolan group members. The Portuguese members would need only an ETA.

"From experience, getting visitor visas for your typical young African citizen, depending on the country, is a problem," Matthews said.

"There's not discrimination, but there is a problem in our system that if you come from a less-developed country, you're going to have a tough time getting a visa than (if you come) from a wealthier country."

Ed Corrigan, a London immigration lawyer, agreed immigration officials likely weren't satisfied the groups would return home and had concern about possible refugee claims, "which has . . . happened in the past with groups that have come to Canada to do summer tours."

"It sounds like immigration is being overly cautious with (Dimension Latina)," he added. "If they're world-renowned and have an extensive travel history and they have family, wife, property, children and grandchildren back in Venezuela, they're likely going to return back to the country."

Corrigan added many Venezuelans have come to Canada and made refugee claims, "but they have not been generally successful."

Audiences expecting Dimensión Latina to play the Jazz Village stage at 6:15 p.m. Friday will see Samba Squad instead. At the beer garden's Creemore Stage, Lazo will take the salsa band's 8:30 p.m. Saturday slot and Bixiga 70 its 4:30 p.m. Sunday show.

Neema Children's Choir, meanwhile, will replace Throes + The Shine on the South stage at 2 p.m. Sunday, while Djmawi Africa will fill in on the Creemore Stage at 8:30 p.m.

A new schedule has been posted on the Sunfest website at sunfest.on.ca.

jbelanger@postmedia.com

twitter.com/JoeBatLFP