Obama to Announce Easing in U.S.-Cuba Relations

By Angela Greiling Keane and Mike Dornings - Dec 17, 2014

President Barack Obama will end the U.S. isolation of Cuba that has persisted for more than a half century, initiating talks to resume diplomatic relations, opening a U.S. embassy in Havana and loosening trade and travel restrictions on the nation.

The steps effectively end an embargo that has been one of the most durable elements of U.S. foreign policy. Travelers will be able to use credit cards in Cuba and Americans will be able to legally bring home up to $100 in previously illegal Cuban cigars treasured by aficionados.
Obama is scheduled to deliver remarks from the White House at 12:01 p.m. Washington time, about the same time that Raul Castro is set to speak in Cuba. The two spoke yesterday about the deal, an administration official said.

“Decades of U.S. isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish our enduring objective of promoting the emergence of a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba,” the White House said in a fact sheet e-mailed to reporters. “We know from hard-learned experience that it is better to encourage and support reform than to impose policies that will render a country a failed state.”

The embargo is one of the last remnants of the Cold War, sacrosanct in U.S. domestic politics because of the influence of the Cuban-American exile community in Florida. Generational shifts have reduced support for the embargo, though Obama’s moves drew criticism from some Cuban-American lawmakers.

The White House announced the steps after
Cuba released American Alan Gross on humanitarian grounds. Following high-level talks between the governments since the spring, the U.S. and Cuba also made a parallel prisoner exchange of three Cuban intelligence agents for a U.S. intelligence asset who has been imprisoned for more than 20 years, according to administration officials who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity before Obama speaks.

Cuba also agreed to release 53 people the U.S. considers political prisoners, some of whom have already been released, the officials said.

**Obama, Castro Speak**

Pope Francis, the Catholic Church’s first Latin-American pontiff, played a role in the talks, sending a letter to Cuban leader Raul Castro and Obama urging negotiation. The Vatican hosted delegations from two countries for talks.

Limits on Cuban-Americans’ remittances to relatives in their homeland will jump to
$8,000 from $2,000 annually. U.S. companies will be permitted to export an expansive list of goods including building materials and allowed to build telecommunications infrastructure on the island.

Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Robert Menendez, who gives up his gavel to a Republican in January, criticized Obama’s action, saying it “sets an extremely dangerous precedent” that “invites dictatorial and rogue regimes to use Americans serving overseas as bargaining chips.”

**Criticism**

“President Obama’s actions have vindicated the brutal behavior of the Cuban government,” said the New Jersey Democrat, whose parents fled Cuba during Fidel Castro’s reign. “I fear that today’s actions will put at risk the thousands of Americans that work overseas to support civil society, advocate for access to information, provide humanitarian services, and promote democratic reforms.”
Senator Richard Durbin, an Illinois Democrat close to Obama, said the action is long overdue.

“Opening the door with Cuba for trade, travel, and the exchange of ideas will create a force for positive change in Cuba that more than 50 years of our current policy of exclusion could not achieve,” Durbin, who visited Gross in Cuba in 2012, said today in an e-mailed statement.

Gross, a 65-year-old American, left Cuba on a U.S. government plane this morning to fly to the U.S., said an administration official familiar with the release.

Gross was arrested by Cuban officials while working to expand Internet access for Havana’s Jewish community. He was accused of undermining the Cuban state and in December 2009 was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Cuba Embargo
Trade with Cuba has been severely restricted for half a century due to a Cold War freeze.

Under President John F. Kennedy, the Central Intelligence Agency backed an armed invasion of the island along with repeated attempts to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro, Raul’s older brother.

The U.S. has maintained an embargo on most trade with the island, a policy that periodically has come under pressure from American business interests that see potential profit there. The World Bank, citing 2011 data, pegs the island’s gross domestic product at more than $68 billion -- about what the U.S. produced that year in a day and a half, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Under Raul Castro, who took over from his brother, Fidel, as acting president in 2006 and succeeded him two years later, the Marxist nation has taken tentative steps away from central planning. In July, Cuba lowered its economic growth forecast for this year to 1.4 percent.
Earlier this week, Moody’s said the economy on the island about 90 miles off the coast of Florida was slowing, citing “decreased reform momentum.”

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