

Ex-President Carter Aims to Thaw Relations During Six-Day Trip to Cuba

By PATTY REINERT

Copyright 2002 Houston Chronicle

HAVANA -- As president, Jimmy Carter forged a historic arms treaty with the Soviet Union, opened diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and negotiated a peace deal between Israel and Egypt.

Since leaving the White House two decades ago, he has monitored elections in Central America, resolved regional conflicts in Africa and fought disease and hunger in Asia.

But when private citizen Carter arrives here this morning, the 77-year-old statesman will attempt to tie up some unfinished business -- finding a way to befriend Cuban President Fidel Castro, a longtime enemy of the U.S. government.

"I do not expect this trip to change the Cuban government or its policies," Carter said recently. "However, it is an opportunity to explore issues of mutual interest between our citizens and to share ideas on how to improve the relationship."

Carter's six-day visit marks the first time a U.S. president, in or out of office, has set foot on this island off the Florida Straits since Castro embraced communism shortly after leading the nation's 1959 revolution. The United States maintains a strict trade embargo against Cuba and makes it difficult for Americans to travel here.

Carter is traveling at the invitation of Castro and with the permission, if not the blessing, of President Bush, whose administration has taken the strongest stance against Cuba since the Reagan era.

Carter plans to tour the country's schools, hospitals and farms, dine with the Cuban leader and talk to the Cuban people in their neighborhoods as well as via a nationally televised address.

Ordinary Cubans, whose access to information is controlled by the government-run press, found out about the visit only days ago. On Saturday, as foreign reporters landed on the island in anticipation of Carter's arrival, many Cubans on the streets of Havana said they view the visit as a positive sign that Cuba and the United States could one day have friendlier relations.

"It's a point of pride for Cubans that he is coming," said a customs official at Jose Marti International Airport who declined to give his name. "Years and years and years have passed, and no U.S. president has visited. Too much time has gone by."

"It's very quiet today," said a taxi driver who gave his name only as Luis. "But tomorrow, people will be out in the streets to greet him. People are excited. This is a positive sign for the future."

During his presidency, Carter eased travel restrictions to Cuba and agreed to establish interest sections in Havana and Washington. Thousands of political prisoners were released from Cuban prisons, and Americans and dual nationals were permitted to return to the United States.

But progress toward more diplomatic relations between the countries was halted after Castro repaid Carter by expanding military activities in Africa.

Still, with the 75-year-old Castro aging and no apparent successor in sight, Carter believes the time could finally be right for another attempt at warming relations between the two countries.

"We only want him to see the country," Castro said earlier this year in a wide-ranging speech after a celebration of his government's victory over dengue fever. "He can criticize all he wants."

Carter is expected to do just that after he meets with dissidents and human rights activists this week to discuss the plight of an estimated 250 political prisoners held in Cuban jails. But he also is expected to strike a conciliatory tone with Castro, even as the Bush administration sharpens its anti-Castro position back home.

Already, top government officials have stepped up their criticism of Castro, pushed Mexico toward a public confrontation with Cuba and put more than 1,000 radios in the hands of information-deprived Cubans, hoping to stir dissent by bringing in uncensored news from the outside world.

The State Department has asked Carter to emphasize the Bush administration's insistence that Cuba move toward democratic elections. On Friday, a group of activists presented their congress a petition that attempts to accomplish that goal.

Last week, the administration angered Cubans when Undersecretary of State John Bolton accused the nation of using its prestigious biotechnology centers to research biological weaponry, and he charged that Cuba has been sharing its technology with "other rogue states."

Cuba has long been listed by the State Department as a country that harbors or helps terrorists, but Bolton refused to provide evidence of the latest allegation or name the countries that the U.S. government believes are receiving help from Cuba.

The Cuban government called Bolton's accusations vile. On Saturday, a group of doctors and researchers held a news conference at the International Press Center, denying Bolton's allegations and inviting reporters to accompany Carter on Monday, when he tours a biotechnology center.

Other stops on Carter's itinerary include a medical facility for AIDS patients, an agricultural cooperative and the University of Havana. The former president also plans to take a walking tour of Old Havana and to set aside time for talking to Cuban citizens.

Castro, meanwhile, is expected to use Carter's visit as a chance to polish his image around the world. Isolated in the Caribbean by his policies and by the U.S. embargo, the Cuban leader has been struggling to feed his people and keep his communist outpost going years after the fall of the Soviet Union plunged the island into economic chaos.

And Castro has made no secret of the fact he would like to purchase food from U.S. farmers and entice more American tourists to his country's beach and diving resorts.

"Castro believes Cuba deserves to be recognized," said Sandra Levinson, executive director of the New York-based Center for Cuban Studies. The center has arranged Cuban study tours for Americans since the early 1970s.

"What he will get out of this visit is the satisfaction of having one U.S. president willing to look at the situation for himself," she said. "After 40 years, you may not like the government, but you acknowledge it."

Beginning last year, the U.S. government has allowed a small trickle of agricultural sales to Cuba. But Cuban exiles in the United States -- many of whom backed Bush in his disputed 2000 presidential election in Florida and support his brother Jeb's re-election bid as governor of that state -- are pressuring the administration to take a hard line on trade and travel restrictions.

Joe Garcia, executive director of the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation, said many people in his community "are not very happy" about Carter's meeting with Castro.

"Jimmy Carter's most enduring legacy is that he set the international standard for human rights, and now he is visiting the largest violator of human rights in the hemisphere," Garcia said.

He urged Carter to defend his own record in that regard and push Castro on the issue.

"We want him to go to the jails, visit the dissidents, ask questions," he said. "If he's going down there with the determination to do those things and stand up to Castro, then he's certainly welcome to do that. "But if he's going down to talk about lifting the embargo, that's nothing new. He's already said that, and what's the difference if he says it from Georgia or Havana?"

First published in the Houston Chronicle May 12, 2002