

Castro Promises Carter 'Free Access' to Cuba

By PATTY REINERT

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HAVANA – Jimmy Carter, sporting his trademark grin, stepped off a private airplane here Sunday, becoming the first U.S. president, in or out of office, to visit this Caribbean island nation since 1928.

Carter, 77, and his wife, Rosalynn, were welcomed to Jose Marti International Airport by Cuban President Fidel Castro, who shook Carter's hand and assured him he would have "free and complete access" to government installations and to the Cuban people.

Castro greeted the Carters wearing a gray suit and black running shoes instead of his customary military fatigues. The attire was seen as a signal that the 75-year-old president wants to play down his revolutionary roots and forge more diplomatic relations between his communist outpost and the United States.

"It is no secret that for almost a century there have not been optimal relations between the two states, and there still are not," Castro told Carter in brief remarks. "However, I wish to state that in the four years of your tenure as president, you had the courage to make efforts to change the course of those relations. That is why those of us who were witnesses to that attitude see you with respect."

Castro escorted Carter down a red carpet to a wooden podium on the airport tarmac where U.S. and Cuban flags flew side by side. The two men stood together as a recording of the Cuban national anthem was played, immediately followed by a rare playing of the U.S. national anthem.

The arrival was carried live on Cuba's state-run television and radio but was attended by only a small delegation of Cuban officials and a much larger group of foreign media.

Carter said he and his wife were delighted to be in Cuba and were looking forward to meeting with Castro to discuss "peace, human rights, democracy and the alleviation of suffering."

"We realize that we have differences on some of these issues, but we welcome the opportunity to try to identify some points in common and some areas of cooperation," he said, reading most of his short speech in Spanish. He also made a point of saying his schedule includes a televised address to the Cuban people, and he reminded them to tune in at 6 p.m. Tuesday. On Thursday, he said, he would meet with "religious and other groups."

Carter's six-day visit is the first by any president since Calvin Coolidge came in 1928, and by any high-ranking U.S. official since Castro declared the country communist after the revolution he led in 1959. And while Carter's journey was given grudging approval by the U.S. government, which normally discourages Americans from traveling here, the visit comes at a time of increased tensions between Cuba and the Bush administration.

Last week, as Carter was preparing for his trip, a top State Department official accused Castro of using his country's prestigious biotechnology centers to try to develop biological weapons and of exporting the technology to nations hostile to the United States.

Castro has adamantly denied the accusations in recent days and has called on the Bush administration to produce its evidence. On Sunday, he noted that Carter's itinerary includes a tour of Havana's Genetic

Engineering and Biotechnology Institute today. He invited the former president to also visit any other research centers on the island, "together with any specialists of your choosing."

"We are a patriotic and honorable people who will never accept impositions or threats from anyone," Castro said, "but we are also sincere friends of the United States."

And in a reference to Carter's plans to meet with Cuba's religious and political dissidents, Castro told Carter he would have "free access to every place you want to go, and we shall not take offense for any contact you may wish to make, even with those who do not share our endeavors."

Castro praised Carter for major breakthroughs in U.S.-Cuban relations during his 1977-81 term, including the opening of Interest Sections in Havana and Washington, an agreement on maritime borders among Cuba, Mexico and the United States, and the easing of travel restrictions on Americans wishing to visit the island.

"There might be those who think that our invitation for you to visit our country is a shrewd maneuver with a mean political purpose," Castro said. "I very sincerely say that it is a deserved recognition of your attitude as president of the United States toward Cuba."

He added that he hoped Carter's visit "is not used by anyone to question your patriotism" or to decrease support for the Carter Center, the former president's Atlanta-based nonprofit foundation that sponsors projects to help the poor around the world.

Following the airport remarks, Castro joined Carter in a polished Soviet-era limousine for the ride to his hotel. An identical limo, down to the license plate number, carried others in the delegation. The cars, a gift to Cuba from one-time Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, are brought out only for the most distinguished visitors.

The Carters met Castro again Sunday night for a private welcome dinner.

Sunday afternoon, Carter exchanged his suit for a casual shirt and slacks, and he and Rosalynn took a walking tour through the sweltering streets of Old Havana. Small groups of Cubans, many out in the city's parks celebrating Mother's Day, greeted him with applause, as did several clusters of foreign students and tourists.

Jose del Busto Fernandez, 21, and Gustavo Lapola Diaz, 20, Guatemalan students who are studying at the University of Havana, said they came to see Carter in anticipation of his speech Tuesday at their school.

"Everyone is very excited," del Busto said. "It's an opening -- a hope for better relations."

Alfredo Chauvin Sanchez, a Cuban plumber who was waiting with his wife, Maria, for a glimpse of Carter, agreed.

"If it weren't for the Mariel problem, our countries could have been friends during Jimmy Carter's administration," he said, referring to the flood of Cuban refugees who boarded boats for America, overwhelming the U.S. Coast Guard and embarrassing Carter after he had tried to improve relations with Cuba.

"For the mistakes of governments, people suffer," said Chauvin. "But we are all Americans -- Cubans, Canadians and North Americans. The Cuban people receive him as a great American friend."

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