

U.S. Congressional Delegation Meets Cuba's Heir Apparent

Nine members of the U.S. House of Representatives met Cuban Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel on Thursday, marking the first time Cuba's heir apparent to power has received an American delegation.

U.S. House of Representatives Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi and eight other House Democrats concluded their two-day visit by meeting Diaz-Canel, 54, who is first in line to the seat of power held by brothers Fidel and Raul Castro since 1959.

The meeting came two months after the United States and Cuba announced a rapprochement and plans to restore diplomatic relations after more than 50 years of hostilities.

The nine Democrats, all supporters of U.S. President Barack Obama's policy change on the Communist-led island, were due to be escorted directly to the airport after the meeting.

It was the first time Diaz-Canel has met any American officials since he became first vice-president two years ago, Cuban officials said. In nine years as president, Raul Castro has received American delegations led by U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy.

Diaz-Canel, who is most likely to become president when Raul Castro steps down in 2018, has generally kept a low profile but occasionally speaks publicly of Cuba's need for a more dynamic and critical press and for a more open Internet.

The United States and Cuba held historic talks in Havana last month aimed at re-establishing diplomatic ties. A second round is scheduled for Feb. 27 in Washington.

Obama, a Democrat, has already started to lift barriers to

trade and travel but needs the Republican-controlled congress to completely lift the 53-year-old trade embargo.

Some pro-business Republicans support Obama's call to lift the embargo, but Pelosi said the Republican leadership in the House has indicated it will block any legislation. In the Senate, legislation has been introduced to lift the embargo and travel restrictions on Americans going to Cuba.

"We are in a bipartisan way going to press the Republican leadership to practice a little democracy in the House of Representatives and allow us to have a debate and a vote on this issue," said Jim McGovern, co-chair of the congressional Human Rights Commission, who joined Pelosi on the trip. "If we have that opportunity, we can prevail."

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