

Cuba, US Restore Diplomatic Ties

The United States and Cuba are set to announce the restoration of diplomatic relations on Wednesday, the result of a two-year courtship between former Cold War rivals who severed ties in 1961.

The chief of the U.S. interests section in Havana will report to Cuban foreign ministry around 9 a.m. (0900 ET) to deliver a letter from U.S. President Barack Obama to Cuban President Raul Castro.

Obama will then speak at 11 a.m. (1100 ET) from the White House's ceremonial Rose Garden. It was unknown whether Castro would reciprocate with comments of his own.

Following 18 months of secret negotiations brokered by Pope Francis and Canada, the two leaders announced separately but simultaneously last December that they planned to reopen embassies in each other's capitals and normalize relations.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is expected at a flag-raising ceremony in Havana later this month, when the so-called U.S. interests section will become a full embassy. Cuba's mission in Washington will undergo a similar upgrade.

The deal last December also included a prisoner swap and sought to relegate to history 56 years of recriminations that have predominated ever since Fidel Castro's rebels overthrew the government of Fulgencio Batista on Jan. 1, 1959.

Two years later, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower closed the U.S. embassy in Havana on Jan. 3, 1961, less than three weeks before President-elect John F. Kennedy was due to take office.

By April of that year, Kennedy would authorize the invasion of

Cuba by a force of Cuban exiles. The attack at the Bay of Pigs failed and reinforced Castro's standing at home and abroad.

In October 1962, Washington and Moscow nearly came to nuclear war over Soviet missiles stationed in Cuba.

Ever defiant toward his neighbor just 90 miles (145 km) to the north, Fidel Castro, 88, remained in power until 2008, when he handed off to his younger brother Raul Castro, 84.

With diplomatic relations restored, the United States and Cuba will turn to the more difficult task of normalizing overall relations.

Major obstacles include the comprehensive U.S. economic embargo of Cuba and the U.S. naval base at Cuba's Guantanamo Bay, which the United States has leased since 1903. Cuba wants the 45 square miles (116 square km) returned as full sovereign territory.

Obama, a Democrat, has asked the Republican-controlled Congress to lift the 53-year-old embargo, but the conservative leadership in Congress has resisted.

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