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Desmond Boylan / Reuters



American Alan Gross (center), who was imprisoned in Cuba, has been freed.

Sipa / AP Images

DECEMBER 19, 2014

A New Era for the U.S. and Cuba

After more than 50 years of hostility, President Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro agree to re-establish diplomatic relations

BY SEAN PRICE

The U.S.'s relationship with Cuba has been in a deep freeze for almost six decades. The United States has refused to recognize Cuba's government, and most trade with the island nation was **embargoed**, or blocked.



Cuban President Raúl Castro (right) with his brother Fidel.

Alejandro Ernesto / EPA /

So the world was stunned on Wednesday when President Barack Obama announced a thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations. He said the two countries would soon renew ties for the first time since the early 1960s.

TIME OF TENSION

Why have the United States and Cuba been so hostile toward each other for so long? Cuba lies only 94 miles off the Florida Keys. In the early 1900s, the United States was deeply involved in Cuban affairs. But that changed in 1959, when a revolution led by Fidel Castro toppled the Cuban government. Castro created a new, Communist government, assuming the role of prime minister.



Jim McMahon

Castro imprisoned his political opponents and **confiscated**, or took control of, private businesses, U.S. and Cuban alike. He also became closely allied with the former Soviet Union during the **Cold War**. The Cold War (1945-1991) was a mostly nonviolent international conflict between democracies, led by the United States, and Communist countries, led by the Soviet Union.

The U.S. opposed Cuba's government and wanted it to change. So it withdrew its ambassador and imposed an economic embargo. This cut off most U.S. trade with Cuba. Restrictions made travel between the two countries almost impossible. These measures continued even after the Cold War ended with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

WHAT'S CHANGED?

President Obama called the relationship with Cuba an "outdated approach" that hasn't worked to change the island nation. In a nationally televised speech, he declared that it's time to end a "rigid policy that is rooted in events that took place before most of us were born."

Under Obama's new policy, the United States will send an ambassador to Cuba. It will also ease—but not end—the economic embargo. The U.S. will likewise ease travel restrictions, making it easier for Cuban-Americans to visit relatives. Business transactions will be easier, and Cubans will be able to communicate more easily with people around the world.

The policy change was made possible partly by a prisoner exchange between the two countries. The United States had long demanded the return of Alan Gross. He had been arrested in Cuba in 2009, while on a mission to bring Internet services to Jewish community groups there. Cuban President Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro's brother, freed Gross and one other prisoner. In exchange, the United States released three Cubans who had been caught spying in the U.S.

PUBLIC REACTION

In Cuba, Raúl Castro broke the news in a televised speech given at the same time as Obama's. Reaction there was joyous. Church bells rang out to celebrate. But some Cuban-Americans have mixed feelings. Many older Cuban-Americans had to flee Cuba to escape prison or death. They say the country remains a brutal dictatorship.

However, many Cuban-Americans in Miami, Florida (which has a large Cuban population), support the new policy. They want to be able to visit family in Cuba and to do more to help those family members financially.

Ric Herrero, the executive director of Cuba Now, a nonprofit group that favors more-open ties between the countries, says, "These changes are going to do more to help empower the Cuban people than 50 years of [the embargo] has ever been able to achieve."

Me llamo:

1. List at least 3 countries that surround Cuba.

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2. What is the capital of Cuba?

3. Why did the U.S. ban (make illegal) trading and visiting Cuba?

4. Why is this ban now removed?
