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Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Raúl Castro Ruz of Cuba in Panama City, Panama

April 11, 2015

President Obama. This is obviously a historic meeting. The history between the United States and Cuba is obviously complicated, and over the years, a lot of mistrust has developed. But during the course of the last several months, there have been contacts between the U.S. and the Cuban Government. And in December, as a consequence of some of the groundwork that had been laid, both myself and President Castro announced a significant change in policy and the relationship between our two governments.

I think that after 50 years of a policy that had not changed on the part of the United States, it was my belief that it was time to try something new: that it was important for us to engage more directly with the Cuban Government and the Cuban people. And as a consequence, I think we are now in a position to move on a path towards the future and leave behind some of the circumstances of the past that have made it so difficult, I think, for our countries to communicate.

Already, we've seen majorities of the American people and the Cuban people respond positively to this change. And I truly believe that as more exchanges take place, more commerce and interactions resume between the United States and Cuba, that the deep connections between the Cuban people and the American people will reflect itself in a more positive and constructive relationship between our governments.

Now, obviously, there are still going to be deep and significant differences between our two governments. We will continue to try to lift up concerns around democracy and human rights. And as we heard from President Castro's passionate speech this morning, they will lift up concerns about U.S. policy as well. But I think what we have both concluded is that we can disagree with a spirit of respect and civility and that, over time, it is possible for us to turn the page and develop a new relationship between our two countries.

And some of our immediate tasks include normalizing diplomatic relations and ultimately opening an Embassy in Havana and Cuba being able to open an Embassy in Washington, DC, so that our diplomats are able to interact on a more regular basis.

So I want to thank President Castro for the spirit of openness and courtesy that he has shown during our interactions. And I think that if we can build on this spirit of mutual respect and candidness, that over time, we will see not just a transformation in the relationship between our two countries, but a positive impact throughout the hemisphere and the world.

And President Castro earlier today spoke about the significant hardships that the people of Cuba have undergone over many decades. I can say with all sincerity that the essence of my policy is to do whatever I can to make sure that the people of Cuba are able to prosper and live in freedom and security and enjoy a connection with the world where their incredible talents and ingenuity and hard work can thrive.

President Castro. Muchas gracias.

President Obama. Thank you.

President Castro. Well, Mr. President, friends from the press, we have been making long speeches and listening to many long speeches too—[*laughter*]—so I do not want to abuse the time of President Obama or your time.

I think that what President Obama has just said, it's practically the same as we feel about these topics, including human rights, freedom of the press. We have said on previous occasions to some American friends that we are willing to discuss every issue between the United States and Cuba. We are willing to discuss about those issues that I have mentioned and about many others, as these reforms, both in Cuba, but also in the United States.

I think that everything can be on the table. I think that we can do it, as President Obama has just said, with respect for the ideas of the other. We could be persuaded of some things; of others, we might not be persuaded. But when I say that I agree with everything that the President has just said, I include that we have agreed to disagree. No one should entertain illusions. It is true that we have many differences. Our countries have a long and complicated history behind them, but we are willing to make progress in the way the President has described.

We can develop a friendship between our two peoples. We shall continue advancing in the meetings which are taking place in order to reestablish relations between our countries. We shall open our Embassies. We shall visit each other, have exchanges, people to people. And now all that matters is what close neighbors can do; we are close neighbors, and there are many things that we can have.

So we are willing to discuss everything, but we need to be patient, very patient. Some things we will agree on; others we will disagree. The pace of life at the present moment in the world, it's very fast. We might disagree on something today on which we could agree tomorrow. And we hope that our closest assistants—part of them are here with us today—we hope that they will follow the instructions of both Presidents.

Thank you so much. *Muchas gracias.* Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:46 p.m. at the ATLAPA Convention Center. President Castro spoke in Spanish, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Cuba, President Castro.

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