

Plan for change in Cuba gets OK

The Bush administration unveiled a much-anticipated report detailing plans to provide more money to support the opposition in Cuba.

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WASHINGTON - President Bush on Monday approved a long-awaited update on U.S. policies to hasten and assist a Cuban turn to democracy after Fidel Castro's reign, including possible assistance to Havana's military and an \$80 million-plus fund to boost the opposition to Castro.

"We are actively working for change in Cuba, not simply waiting for change," Bush said in a statement unveiling the 95-page report by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, a multiagency panel he created in 2003.

Arguing that vital U.S. interests are at stake in pushing for a transition to democracy, instead of a succession by new communist leadership after the 79-year-old Castro leaves power, the report underlined Bush administration pledges to promote freedom and democracy worldwide.

The text -- accompanied by a two-page "Compact with the People of Cuba" that promises to "work with the Cuban people to attain political and economic liberty" -- predicts a clash between an "energized" opposition and an "intrinsically unstable" attempt at succession.

"The opposition movement is creating momentum for democratic change in Cuba," said the State Department's Cuba transition coordinator, Caleb McCarry. "With our offer of advice and assistance . . . we hope to add to this momentum."

Cuba's government has criticized the report as a blatant violation of the island's sovereignty and called dissidents paid "mercenaries" of the U.S. government. The report's inclusion of a classified annex -- whose contents remain unknown -- prompted the head of the Cuban legislature, Ricardo Alarcón, to speculate recently that it may include plans to assassinate Castro.

Dissidents in Havana met the report with mixed reactions.

"We didn't ask for economic help, and we don't want it," said Miriam Leiva, founding member of dissident group Ladies in White, in a telephone interview. "This report serves as supposed evidence for the government to take us to jail."

But former political prisoner Vladimiro Roca, who along with several other dissidents attended a teleconference on the report from Washington at the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana, said he would accept any aid.

"It would be more than welcome," he said in a telephone conversation. "The government is going to call us that anyway. That's what they want, for us not to take money . . . We need materials, equipment, clothes, everything."

PROVIDES SUPPORT

The U.S. government does not give cash to dissidents. It provides funding to U.S. and other nongovernment groups that support the dissident movements, and can supply Cubans with equipment such as radios, faxes and paper.

Cuban-American lawmakers thanked Bush for his "solidarity with the Cuban people's right to be free" in a statement issued by Miami Republican Reps. Lincoln and Mario Díaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. But Ros-Lehtinen said she was disappointed that the "wet foot/dry foot" policy for Cuban migrants had not been revised.

The report, an update of a similar document in 2004, was officially presented by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Cuban-American Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, the co-chairs of the commission.

It proposes no significant changes in Washington's policy toward Cuba and, in general, tightens some of the U.S. sanctions already on the books. It has minor changes from a draft recently revealed by The Miami Herald.

The report suggests offering "assistance in preparing the Cuban military forces to adjust to an appropriate role in a democracy" -- but does not offer any details, and U.S. officials did not clarify this.

It also recommends creating an \$80 million fund in 2007 and 2008 -- a move that would have to be approved by Congress -- to promote democracy in Cuba plus a broad array of measures, from denying visas to human rights violators to stopping humanitarian aid from reaching organizations with alleged links to the government.

ACCESS TO MEDIA

The report places a high priority on overcoming the Cuban government's restrictions on Cubans' access to a free media and the Internet. "We are increasing our determination to break the regime's information blockade," Rice said.

The commission proposed earmarking \$24 million for "efforts to break the information blockade"; \$31 million to support "independent civil society" groups on the island; \$10 million for educational exchanges; and \$15 million to support "international efforts at strengthening civil society and transition planning."

After 2008, the report recommends adding at least \$20 million annually to the program, to be known as the Cuba Fund for a Democratic Future.

OTHER ASSISTANCE

U.S. officials said the money comes on top of democracy assistance programs run by the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development, which amount to about \$10 million a year. The U.S. government also spends about \$35 million a year on Radio and TV Martí. The broadcasters could get more money under the new arrangement.

Officials underscored that many of the recommendations for U.S. actions would kick in only if Cuba's post-Castro leadership moves toward democracy and requests them.

"We will do all this and more, provided we are asked by a Cuban transition government that is committed to dismantling all instruments of state repression and implementing internationally respected human rights and fundamental freedoms, including organizing free and fair elections . . . within a period of no more than 18 months," Gutierrez said.