

*POST CASTRO*

# **U.S. ready to help Cubans in rebuilding their country**

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I have a very special interest in events in Cuba. As a child, my family became part of the exodus fleeing the communist dictatorship in search of freedom. As the U.S. ambassador to Spain and Andorra, I represent a country deeply interested in Cuba's future of freedom, democracy and economic progress. Like many other freedom-loving people in the world, I have strong hopes for a better future for Cuba.

Last month, in a report by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, the United States described the assistance it is ready to offer to a Cuban transition government, if asked. As expected, there have been many efforts to distort U.S. policies and misrepresent what the report really says. (To decide for yourself, see the report at [www.cafc.gov](http://www.cafc.gov).)

Let me state our

policy as clearly as possible: The United States does not want to witness a mere succession, the continuation of a dictatorship that already has lasted nearly half a century. Our hope is for a prompt, genuine transformation to democracy, with full rights and freedoms for the Cuban people, the liberation of political prisoners, and free and fair elections within 18 months.

This report is not our "plan" for Cuba. It is not a formula or a prescription. It's simply the expression of our belief that the Cuban people have the right to a normal life, just like people in any other country. It summarizes our willingness to offer help if a new Cuban government decides that such help is appropriate.

## **Immediate assistance**

What type of help could the United States offer a Cuban transition government? To start, food, water, medicine, fuel and other supplies to respond to immediate humanitarian needs. We stand ready over the longer term to help the transition government build a stronger foundation for economic growth by opening economic opportunities, attracting investment and supporting assistance from international financial institutions. We are ready to work with Cubans, if

requested, to overcome obstacles to democratic change: such as offering technical assistance to election authorities, preparing Cuban military forces as they adjust to an appropriate role in a democratic society, and offering training to independent labor, youth, women's and other groups.

The United States offers continued support to Cuban civil society as it works to strengthen a process of democratic change on the island. Cuba is not alone in facing such a transition; many Central and Eastern European countries, for example, may offer valuable experiences for Cubans to consider.

While the dictatorship lasts, the United States will continue to work to counter the government's stranglehold on information. Access to the Internet, to name just one example, is completely controlled by the Cuban regime. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are basic democratic principles; we believe the Cuban people have the right to enjoy them. We hope that a greater openness to independent, uncensored information will help hasten the end of the dictatorship.

The regime seeks to frighten Cubans with the boogeyman of foreigners descending onto the island and expelling people from their houses. Let me address that fabrication: The United States defends the right of Cubans to be secure in their homes, and we will not support any arbitrary effort to expel them. A democratically elected Cuban government, representing the will of the Cuban people, will make any decisions regarding property rights and confiscated properties.

Fidel Castro's five decades of rule have seen hundreds of thousands of Cubans flee -- to the United States, Mexico, Spain and elsewhere in the world. Many of them, as part of a broader effort by the international community, may want to offer their expertise, resources and assistance to a Cuba being reborn. This is the same pattern we have seen before with émigrés and refugees from other countries. But the 11 million Cubans still living on the island are the ones who will play the leading role in Cuba's transition to democracy. There is only one Cuban people. We should reject the self-serving efforts by some to create artificial divisions among them and instead help promote reconciliation and unity.

I cannot foresee what news will come regarding President Castro's medical condition. I do not know when his 47-year-old dictatorship will end. But I do know that his despotism represents the sad past, not the hopeful future for the

Cuban people. When that end comes, the U.S. government is willing -- if we are so requested by a Cuban transition government -- to assist in a genuine movement toward a democratic future. Because I have a very special interest in Cuba, I pray that the people of Cuba can finally leave behind the failed rhetoric of the past and join the 21st century.

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