

U.S.: Democracy could end embargo

Washington offered Cuba a chance to lift the economic embargo -- but only if it moves toward democracy.

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WASHINGTON - Just days after Cuba's acting president, Raúl Castro, gave a blistering attack on the United States but at the same time hinted he's willing to negotiate, the State Department offered a response: Free your prisoners and elect your leaders. Only then will we lift the trade embargo.

Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon held a news conference about U.S. Cuba policy Wednesday for the foreign press, in which he reiterated Washington's terms for lifting the United States' decades-old trade embargo against Cuba.

Shannon said the administration would work with Congress to lift the embargo "and begin a deeper engagement with the Cuban state" if the government frees its more than 300 political prisoners, respects human rights, allows independent political parties and creates "a pathway towards elections."

They are the same terms Cuba has rejected for years.

"From our point of view, the offer's still on the table," Shannon said. "And we believe that if the Cuban government were to begin a political opening and a transition to democracy, we could be in a position, following the offer made in 2002, to begin to look at ways to deepen our own relationship with Cuba."

U.N. VOTES

Cuba's communist government says the U.S. trade embargo costs the island nation nearly \$1.8 billion a year. Cuba raises the issue at every international forum, boasting that the U.N. General Assembly has resoundly voted against the embargo 14 years straight.

Raúl Castro suggested in an interview in Friday's Communist Party daily Granma that he is willing to talk. But he blasted Bush administration policy as an attempt to intervene in Cuba.

'From over there, as if they were the rulers of the planet, they are saying that there must be a transition to a social regime of their liking and that they would take note of those who oppose that,' " Raúl Castro said.

'FIDEL LITE'

His Granma interview was dismissed by the State Department last week as the words of "Fidel Lite" and Shannon Wednesday showed little interest in engaging the temporary Cuban leader.

Although the 2002 offer was rejected at the time by Cuba, Shannon has twice brought up the proposal since Cuban President Fidel Castro temporarily turned over power to his younger brother.

Raúl Castro said last week Cuba has "always been disposed to normalize relations," but that it would be possible "only when the United States decides to negotiate with seriousness and is willing to treat us with a spirit of equality, reciprocity and the fullest mutual respect."

CHANGE FROM WITHIN

Shannon repeated the administration's belief that change must come from within the island, but he suggested the administration has yet to be encouraged by what it's hearing.

"Political openings and democratizations can take a variety of forms, and we'd be very interested in hearing from the Cubans themselves about how they would . . . envision that happening, if they envision it at all," Shannon said. ``The initial comments that we have received don't seem to indicate a whole lot of interest, but we're listening."

Acknowledging the Cuban government remains hard to read, Shannon said the U.S. believes the country is undergoing a "slow-motion transfer of power" and that the elder Castro is unlikely to return to full speed.