

Bush to talk tough, urge change in Cuban rule

President Bush, in a hard-line speech crafted for an international audience, will call for democracy and freedom in Cuba.

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush will make it clear in a speech Wednesday that he won't compromise with Havana, saying he favors freedom over stability and directly urging Cuba's security forces to stop repressing dissidents, according to government officials familiar with the text.

Bush also will promise more aid if Cuba takes a democratic turn, including new programs like scholarships for Cuban students and computers that would allow more people on the island to access the Internet.

Bush's first address devoted to Cuba since 2003 -- and only his fourth since assuming the presidency -- comes as interim Havana leader Raúl Castro appears to be firmly in power and many nations are doing business as usual with a man who looks like the permanent replacement for the ailing Fidel Castro.

The announcement of his address at the State Department had triggered speculation of a major policy shift, and Fidel Castro even gave a preemptive rebuke to the speech.

But U.S. officials told The Miami Herald that a broader aim of the speech is to use the State Department venue -- and an audience that will include members of Congress, the diplomatic corp and the Washington policy community -- to urge other nations to do more to help Cuba's beleaguered dissidents.

"This is not to a Miami audience," said a senior administration official who asked for anonymity as a condition for discussing details of the speech.

To highlight the plight of Cuban dissidents, the audience will also include six family members of Cuban political prisoners jailed in a 2003 crackdown. Among them will be Yamilé Llánes, who met with Bush at the White House two weeks ago. Her husband, José Luis García, is serving a 24-year sentence for supporting a pro-democracy campaign.

Bush will make it clear in the speech that the aim of his administration in Cuba is freedom -- not stability -- on the island, the official said. Some Cuba-watchers have long feared a U.S. hard line on Cuba would spark chaos and trigger a rafter crisis.

"He will declare that it's not our policy to accommodate a new tyranny in the interests of stability," said the official.

Bush also will instruct Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez -- a Cuban American -- to set up an international "freedom fund" to help Cuba rebuild its economy once a democratic government is in place. The official did not provide details on who would provide the financing.

REMARKS TO CUBANS

The address will be broadcast live to Cuba by Radio and TV Martí, the official added, and Bush will include "some specific remarks to Cubans in the regime, particularly the military and the security services."

Bush will remind them that Cubans aspire to freedom and that "they will have a choice to make, and that he hopes that they will make the right choice, and that there will be a place for them in a democratic Cuba," the official added.

The official denied that Bush's comments will in any way amount to a call for a violent rebellion, and said the president is instead reminding Cubans that they have the power to shape their destiny, much Eastern Europe did when overthrowing communist governments.

The Bush administration has already attempted to sway nations to take a harder line against Havana, but few have done so, with many nations preferring to wait until Fidel Castro dies.

Bush also will thank the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland for calling for more freedoms in Cuba. But the idea, the official added, is not to lecture countries.

"In no way is it the president trying to say, 'You have to do this, you have to do that,'" he said. "It's an appeal to conscience. This is the brutal reality of today's Cuba."

Bush also will make a license available for nongovernmental organizations that want to use private money to provide computers and Internet access to Cubans, provided the government allows all Cubans on the island to access the Internet.

Bush will extend an existing scholarship program for Latin American students to cover Cuban youths, as well.

"Part of this goes to saying to the world that it's the regime that stands in the way," the official noted. "It's the regime that's denying Internet access, it's the regime that's denying Cubans the opportunity to engage in this kind of activity."

THE CUBAN RESPONSE

In Cuba, Fidel Castro wrote two essays this week mocking Bush's expected announcement.

On Sunday, he said that Bush "is obsessed with Cuba," and on Tuesday he accused Bush of being a driving force behind a possible nuclear war and famine. Bush's announcement, Castro said, comes just days before the annual U.N. debate on the U.S. trade embargo against the island.

'For the first time, just before the annual discussion before the United Nations of the Cuban resolution condemning the blockade, the president of the United States announces he will adopt new measures to accelerate the `period of transition' in our country, the equivalent of a reconquest by force," he wrote.

``Meanwhile the danger of worldwide mass famine is aggravated with Mr. Bush's recent initiative to convert food to gasoline. Invoking security strategy principles, he threatens humanity with a third world war, which this time would be with atomic weapons."