

Cuba warns U.S. against regime change

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UNITED NATIONS --

Cuba's foreign minister on Tuesday warned that his country is prepared to defend itself if the United States tries to bring regime change by force, saying a conflict would jeopardize U.S. stability.

"We are not threatening and we never bluff," Felipe Perez Roque said in an interview with the Associated Press. "We respect the United States, but we demand respect for ourselves, and we would defend our country from an attempt to have foreign aggression."

He claimed that President Bush's recent major policy speech on Cuba, in which the president challenged the international community to help the people of the communist island shed Fidel Castro's rule and become a free society, indicated the U.S. might be prepared to use force.

Perez Roque singled out a comment from Bush's speech last week: "The operative word in our future dealings with Cuba is not stability. The operative word is freedom."

"If that's the expression of the attempt to bring about a regime change by force in Cuba, that will clash with the resilience of the Cuban people, and the people are prepared," Perez Roque said.

In Cuba, he said, more than 90 percent of the 11.5 million people support "the genuine revolution" that began in 1959 when Castro toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista.

The only "freedom" that Cubans can imagine Bush pursuing, Perez Roque added, "would be similar to the one he has taken to Iraq," where war has continued for years.

"An attempt to bring about a change in regime in Cuba is going to jeopardize not only Cuba's stability, but also the stability of the United States because then a conflict would be unleashed very close to their shores," Perez Roque warned.

Asked to comment on Perez Roque's statements, Richard Grenell, spokesman for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, said: "We strongly believe that the Cuban people deserve the powerful force of freedom and democracy."

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Cuba, lists the country as a state sponsor of terror, and has long sought to isolate it through travel restrictions and a trade embargo, which has been tightened over Bush's two terms. This year, the U.S. stepped up enforcement of financial sanctions, which Perez Roque strongly denounced.

Perez Roque spoke to the AP shortly after the U.N. General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to urge the United States to end its 46-year-old trade embargo against Cuba. The resolution passed with the highest ever margin - 184 to 4 with 1 abstention - in the 16 years it has come before 192-member body. Albania, El Salvador and Iraq did not vote.

Calling it "an historic victory," the Cuban minister said it was the international community's answer to Bush's speech and showed global support for "the Cuban right to be an independent nation, to be respected in its right to self-determination."

Though the resolution is not legally binding, Perez Roque said the vote "has a very important ethical and moral meaning" and strengthened "our resilience and our decision, really, to resist and finally to defeat the blockade."

In his speech, Bush did not mention Fidel or his brother, Raul, by name. Raul Castro has been the island's interim ruler since July 2006, when the 81-year-old Fidel temporarily ceded power to his brother after undergoing intestinal surgery.

But Bush said "the dissidents of today will be the nation's leaders" after the Castro era, and he told the Cuban military: "You may have once believed in the revolution. Now you can see its failure."

The Bush administration sees Castro's failing health as an opening for change. But little has changed in Cuba under Raul Castro, 76, and Bush said in his speech that the U.S. will make no accommodations for "a new tyranny."

Perez Roque called Bush's statements "the expression of the failed policy of the United States towards Cuba," which was demonstrated by the total lack of support for the U.S. in Tuesday's vote.

Perez Roque said he would like the next U.S. administration to sit down with the Cuban government and negotiate improved relations, "but I'm not dying with anxiety to see it happen."

"Cuba doesn't pose a threat to the U.S. Cuba is a country that would like to have normal relations with the United States," he said.

What about the future of Fidel Castro as the country's leader?

Perez Roque said Fidel is continuing his recovery, and met with him last Friday to discuss his General Assembly speech. But he said he could not speculate on whether Fidel would return to power soon.

As for Raul Castro, Perez Roque said despite being demonized by some of the media, the acting president "has a great deal of moral authority in Cuba."

"The Cubans feel that they are close of Raul, as they've been with Fidel, and in Cuba it was no surprise that with Fidel's disease, Raul was called upon to take over," Perez Roque said.