

More remittances, travel for a free Cuba

OUR OPINION: U.S. CAN HELP BREAK THE ISOLATION IMPOSED ON CUBAN PEOPLE

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Slowly but surely, change is coming to Cuba. Even Cuban teens are risking arrest to wear plastic bracelets stamped *cambio* (change). Now is the time for the United States to do its part to follow the advice of the late Pope John Paul II for the world to "open itself to Cuba." The U.S. government should lift harsh restrictions on travel and remittances to the island to encourage more people-to-people contacts and support for Cubans pushing for democracy.

Castro's fantasy

Fissures among the communist regime's ruling elite are becoming more evident. Last week at the United Nations, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said that Cuba was ready to renounce "its sovereignty" to "join a grand bloc of Latin American and Caribbean nations." The comment may reflect Fidel Castro's fantasy, now adopted by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, of a "revolutionary" empire. But it contradicts years of nationalist fervor fanned by the regime.

More telling is that the minister's remarks weren't published in Cuba's official press. This could be a sign of divisions between Castro loyalists and those who favor Fidel's brother, Raúl, the provisional ruler since Fidel became ill last year. Other signs suggest many within the official ranks may be fed up with the totalitarian system that offers no better future.

This is why President Bush was correct in his recent speech on Cuba to encourage Cubans in the military, police and government to strive for reconciliation and democratic change. After nearly 50 years of dictatorship, Cubans deserve better than cosmetic economic reform without human rights.

The U.S. government should do more to break the regime's imposed isolation of the Cuban people. How will civil society grow without outside resources and contacts? How will Cubans, including government and military officials, overcome their fear of change?

More family travel and cultural and academic exchanges would open a world of information and supportive contacts for Cubans on the island. More remittances would help sustain political prisoners as well as Cuban democrats stripped of jobs. This would allow Cubans to compare democracy and free markets to the regime's alternative.

Isolation a tool

President Bush should take the advice of experts like Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, who lived the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe, and most Cuban dissidents

including hard-liner Martha Beatriz Roque. All push for more openings, travel and contact with Cuba. It is no accident that Cuba and North Korea are the longest-lasting dictatorships left. Both have used isolation to keep people enslaved.

After Fidel Castro dies, Cubans will have a chance to shape their destiny. Opening up to Cuba now will encourage a transition to freedom.