

Cuban Official Warns US Still Seeking Regime Change

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A Cuban foreign ministry official said Washington may still be trying to remove the Communist Party from power in the island nation.

The United States may still be attempting to remove the Cuban Communist Party from power, in spite of a public promise from President Barack Obama to move away from “regime change,” warned an island nation foreign ministry official Thursday.

With only three days to go before Cuba and the U.S. reopen embassies in each others’ nations after 54 years, Cuba said the United States needs to abandon its policy of regime change if Washington really wants better ties with the Caribbean nation.

“You have to appreciate the words of the president ... but you also have to see what happens in practice,” Gustavo Machin, the deputy director for U.S. affairs in the Cuban Foreign Ministry, said during a news conference.

Obama told reporters at the Summit of the Americas in Panama that regarding Cuba, “We are not in the business of regime change.” The normalisation of relations process began in December 2014.

The U.S. president’s statement came after a face-to-face meeting with Cuban President Raul Castro. It signaled a break from U.S. efforts to overthrow or destabilise the Cuban government since former President Fidel Castro came to power in a 1959 revolution.

But, Machin insisted, “We haven’t seen anything suggesting practical change.” The diplomatic official cited multimillion-dollar annual budgets for what are commonly called the Cuban democracy programs, which Cuba believes are Washington’s hostile efforts to undermine its government and socialist political system.

In fact, according to Reuters, the 2016 U.S. State Department budget request contemplated US\$20 million for such programs to aid victims of political repression, support civil society and promote free speech.

“We recognize the statement by the president, but you have to see the practical impact of what happens, don’t you?” Machin reiterated.

Diplomatic relations will be restored on Monday when the so-called interests sections in Washington and Havana will be upgraded to embassies.

For the first time since 1959, a Cuban foreign minister will travel to the United States on Monday, when Cuba will hold a ceremony in Washington with some 500 guests and a delegation led by the Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, Machin announced. Washington has yet to schedule Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Havana to raise the U.S. flag.

Following the reopening of embassies, Cuban and U.S. officials are expected to begin talks to further normalise relations. Cuba has insisted that in order for relations to be considered fully normalized, the United States needs to lift the illegal blockade on Cuba and return Guantanamo Bay to Havana.

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