

《奥巴马将于3月21访问古巴》

NEW YORK, Feb. 18 (Xinhua) -- U.S. President Barack Obama will visit Cuba in March, the White House announced Thursday, marking the latest effort to push forward the policy shift spearheaded by his administration just over a year ago.

Yet, in an election year adding urgency and uncertainty to his diplomatic endeavors, Obama's decision to visit Cuba with only 11 months left in office is seen as another wishful approach to seal a foreign policy legacy.

Also, Obama's endeavor on Cuba is compromised by the U.S. economic embargo in place on Havana for decades and that only Congress has authority to lift, experts say.

POLITICAL LEGACY IN FOCUS

The White House said Obama and the first lady will visit Cuba on March 21-22, calling the trip "historic" and the first by a sitting U.S. president in nearly 90 years.

The visit "is another demonstration of the President's commitment to chart a new course for U.S.-Cuban relations," the White House said in a statement.

However, words of his travel plans immediately drew doubts and resistance from opponents of warmer ties with Cuba, including Republican presidential candidates.

Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at Council on Foreign Relations, a New York-based think tank, raised questions about Obama's intention.

"This visit is about the President's vanity and search for a legacy, not about freedom and human rights for the people of Cuba," he wrote in a blog post. "And that's a disgrace."

He said the real effect of the Obama "opening" is an increase in the flow of funds to the Cuba government through tourism and business with state-owned companies.

"Why is the President visiting, given the lack of change?" Abrams wrote. "Because he cannot resist the photo op with Fidel Castro. It's as simple as that."

This view resonates with Chu Gang, a researcher at the Beijing-based independent think tank Center for China and Globalization. Obama's upcoming visit to Cuba is not a hasty arrangement, he told Xinhua.

Obama is aimed at building a political legacy and also scoring extra points for his fellow Democrats in the election

year, Chu said.

A slew of Republicans, including two leading Republican presidential contenders whose parents emigrated from Cuba to the United States, sharply criticized Obama's travel plan.

Senator Marco Rubio said that normalizing relations simply gave Cuba millions if not billions of dollars in new resources.

Rubio called the Cuba government "anti-American," saying that he wanted the bilateral relationship to change but it has to be reciprocal.

"I was saddened to hear, but I wasn't surprised," Senator Ted Cruz said about the planned visit, adding that Obama is going "to essentially act as an apologist."

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, also a Republican presidential contender, is equally harsh. "Well, it's a tragedy in my mind that we have diplomatic realtions and the president's trying to build a legacy here," Bush told Fox News.

EMBARGO REMAINS

In Havana, Obama is to meet with Cuban President Raul Castro as well as members of civil society and entrepreneurs and Cubans "from different walks of life," the White House said.

"We still have differences with the Cuban government that I will raise directly," Obama tweeted.

Josefina Vidal, the lead negotiator in the Cuban government's talks with Washington, welcomed Obama's upcoming visit as "a further step toward improving relations between Cuba and the United States."

"Cuba is open to talking with the United States on any issue," Vidal told reporters in Havana, adding that the two countries indeed have different views on many issues, including political models and international relations.

The normalization of bilateral relations is dependent on the resolution of key outstanding issues, including the lifting of the blockade, and the return to Cuba of the territory illegally occupied by the Guantanamo Naval base, Vidal said.

At the news of Obama's deeply symbolic trip, a comment posted on the Cubasi news site reads, "I'm going to take him to have lunch at my local diner so he can see the effects that his government's cruel and ruthless embargo has on us."

After decades of animosity following Cuba's 1959 revolution, Washington and Havana agreed in 2014 to move to reopen ties but the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba remains in force.

Facing strong opposition to normalized relations from Republicans and some Democrats, Obama is at his wits' end to deliver on Cuba's biggest request -- the lifting of the U.S. embargo on Cuba.

The Obama administration has taken steps to expand commerce with the island nation, including agreeing to operate regular commercial flights. But it cannot lift the economic sanctions placed on Cuba since 1962 as the Republican-controlled Congress is averse to doing so.

President Castro has said the two countries have made no progress in the past year on key issues that are essential for normalizing bilateral relations.

The key issues include lifting the trade embargo, withdrawal from the Guantanamo Bay, and ending programs aimed at "regime change," Castro said in December marking the anniversary of the two countries' announcement on restoring diplomatic ties.

Castro and Obama last met during the United Nations General Assembly in September, after their first historic face-to-face encounter at the Summit of the Americas in April 2015.

Given the foreseeable political changes in the United States, the Cuban government is wary of challenges ahead on the road of normalizing bilateral ties.

Last month, Vidal said while building a relationship from the ground up requires time, the upcoming presidential election added a sense of urgency to the process.

She told the official Cuban News Agency that if Obama speeds up the dismantling of existing U.S. sanctions on the island nation while he's still in power, the ties will be less vulnerable after he leaves office.

"I'm still working with a high dose of optimism, but some degree of realism is beginning to weigh on me, because elections are coming up in the United States and we don't know what's going to happen," Vidal said.

Obama's Cuba visit is part of a Latin American tour that will also take him to Argentina on March 23-24.