

Gerardo, Ramon and Tony Are Freed in Cuba-U.S. Prisoner Exchange



Havana, December 17 (RHC)-- Cuban President Raul Castro has announced that the remaining three of the Cuban Five have been released from U.S. prisons and have returned to Cuba. The announcement was made during a nationally televised address, at the same time that U.S. President Barack Obama announced that Washington and Havana would begin to discuss normalization of diplomatic relations.

The news ran swiftly through international news agencies on Wednesday, as speculation grew that Cuba and U.S. relations were ready to take a dramatic turn for the better.

Here is the full text, translated by Radio Havana Cuba in English, of Cuban President Raul Castro's address to the Cuban people on Wednesday.

Compatriots, since my designation as President of the Cuban Council of State and Ministers, I have reiterated on numerous occasions our willingness and readiness to engage in a frank, respectful dialogue with the U.S. government as equals, and with full respect for our nations' sovereignty to openly discuss any subject, as long as it does not compromise our nation's independence nor renounce our people's inalienable right to self-determination.

This position has been expressed by Comrade Fidel to the U.S. government, both publicly and privately, at different times throughout our long struggle, always expressing our willingness and readiness to debate and find solutions to our differences through negotiations, without renouncing any of our principles.

By making a lot of sacrifices, the heroic Cuban people have fully demonstrated, despite countless adversity and aggressions of all kinds, their unwavering loyalty to our ideals of independence and social justice.

Tightly united over the past 56 years of Revolution, we have remained loyal to those who fought and gave their lives defending those principles, ever since the beginning of our independence struggle in 1868.

Despite many difficulties, we are today immersed in a process to update our economic model to build a socialism that is prosperous and sustainable.

Resulting from a top-level dialogue, which included a phone conversation yesterday with President Barack Obama, we have advanced toward the solution of some issues of bilateral interest.

Just as Fidel promised in June 2001, when he said, 'they will be back' in reference to the Cuban Five, today Gerardo, Ramón and Antonio have returned home to Cuba. The happiness of their families and of all our people, who fought tirelessly toward this end, is shared by the hundreds of thousands of people gathered in hundreds of solidarity committees and groups around the world, the governments, parliaments, organizations, institutions and world personalities, who for the past 16 years contributed their efforts to win their release. To all of them, we say 'thank you' and express our deepest gratitude and commitment.

This decision by U.S. President Barack Obama deserves our people's full respect and recognition. I would like to also thank the Vatican, especially Pope Francis, for his support in improving U.S.-Cuba relations. Likewise, I would like to thank the government of Canada for facilitating the top-level dialogue between our two countries.

We have also decided to free and send to the United States a spy of Cuban origin at the service of the U.S. government. Also, for humanitarian reasons, we released U.S. citizen Alan Gross and sent him back home. Also, unilaterally and in strict compliance with Cuban law, we have released a group of Cuban prisoners, including some people that the U.S. government had expressed interest in. We also agreed on the reestablishment of bilateral diplomatic relations.

This does not mean that all the main problems have been solved. The economic, financial and commercial blockade, which has caused severe human and economic damage to our country, should be lifted.

Although the blockade measures have been turned into law, the U.S. president can modify their application, using his executive powers. We propose to the U.S. government to take mutually beneficial measures in order to improve the bilateral atmosphere and advance towards the full normalization of ties between our two countries, based on the principles of international law and the UN Charter.

Cuba reiterates, once again, our willingness and readiness to cooperate with the U.S. at international fora, including the United Nations. We realize that we have profound differences, particularly on the issues of national sovereignty, democracy, human rights and foreign policy and we reaffirm our willingness to discuss each and every issue.

We urge the government of the United States to remove all the obstacles that hinder or restrict links between our two countries, families and citizens from the two countries, particularly the travel restrictions, current regulations on direct mail service and telecommunications.

The progress achieved with the latest exchanges fully demonstrate that we can find solutions to many of our problems. As we have repeatedly said, we should learn to coexist in a civilized way despite our differences.

We will talk again soon about these important issues.

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