

Historic encounter with Cuba's Castro awaits Obama in Panama

Associated Press

PANAMA CITY — Turning the page on a half-century of hostility, President Barack Obama signaled Thursday he will soon remove Cuba from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, boosting hopes for improved ties as he prepared for a historic encounter with Cuban President Raul Castro.

Hours before his arrival in Panama for a regional summit, Obama said the U.S. State Department had finished its review of Cuba's presence on the list, a stain on the island nation's pride and a major stumbling block for efforts to mend U.S.-Cuba ties. A top senator confirmed that the agency had recommended removing Cuba from the list, all but ensuring action by the president within days.

"We don't want to be imprisoned by the past," Obama said during a visit to Kingston, Jamaica. "When something doesn't work for 50 years, you don't just keep on doing it. You try something new."

With his optimistic assessment, Obama sought to set the tone for

the U.S. and Cuba to come closer to closing the book on more than a half-century of estrangement, when he and Castro come face to face at the Summit of the Americas. Obama arrived Thursday evening in Panama City.

The highly anticipated interaction with Castro will test the power of personal diplomacy as the two leaders attempt to move past the sticking points that have interfered with their attempt to relaunch diplomatic relations.

The U.S. has long since stopped actively accusing Cuba of supporting terrorism, and Obama has hinted at his willingness to take Cuba off the list ever since he and Castro announced a thaw in relations in December. Yet Obama has stopped short of the formal decision amid indications that the White House was reluctant to grant Cuba's request until other thorny issues — such as restrictions on U.S. diplomats in Havana — were resolved.

Cuba is one of just four countries still on the U.S. list of countries accused of repeatedly supporting global terrorism; Iran,



AP Photo/Desmond Boylan
A woman sits in a private collective taxi decorated with the Cuban and U.S. flags in Havana, Cuba, Thursday.

Sudan and Syria are the others. The designation not only offends Cuba's pride but also restricts Havana's access to credit and financial systems.

Sen. Ben Cardin of Maryland, the top Democrat on the Senate's foreign relations panel, called the recommendation to delist Cuba an

important step toward forging a more productive U.S.-Cuba relationship. "The United States has a unique opportunity to begin a fresh chapter with Cuba — one that advances our national interests on the island and in the hemisphere," he said.

Yet while recent polling has shown broad support for the thaw in both Cuba and the U.S., the change has attracted fierce opposition from many other members of Congress — especially those who represent the large Cuban-American population in Florida. House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said Thursday there were "serious questions" about taking Cuba off the list "while this dictatorship, which practices repression at home and supports violence throughout the region, continues to hold power."

This year's summit is the first to include Cuba, and for Castro it's a powerful opportunity to prove his country can be a responsible player on the world stage. Obama arrives having amassed some goodwill in Latin America by upending the U.S. policy of isolating Cuba, a policy that irritated others in the region.

How much face time Obama and Castro will have at the summit was unclear. Although no formal meetings were scheduled, the White House said the two would surely cross paths.

BRIEFLY

Police cruiser video shows moments before fatal shooting

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP)

— The traffic stop starts like any other: an officer pulls over a motorist, walks up to the driver's side window and asks for license and registration. What happened minutes later appears to take place without any obvious sign of provocation or conflict: The driver opens the door and runs, and the officer chases after him.

Video released Thursday from the dashboard of white North Charleston police Officer Michael Thomas Slager's cruiser captures the very first moments he and black motorist Walter Scott meet, a strikingly benign encounter at its earliest stages. It changes within minutes as Scott takes off running and the officer runs after him.

The video captures the moments leading up to a fatal shooting that has sparked outrage as the latest example of a white police officer killing an unarmed black man. The shooting itself was captured by an eyewitness on his iPhone and provided the impetus for the officer to be charged with murder and fired.

But questions had remained how the traffic stop turned deadly. The dash cam video provides a more complete picture of the encounter.

Seth Stoughton, a former police officer and criminal law professor at the University of South Carolina, said the dash cam video shows nothing that would indicate that such a routine traffic stop would escalate to a fatal shooting.

"It's not entirely normal. Most people don't run during traffic stops. But it is not overly threatening or anything that should take an officer aback," Stoughton said.

The shooting took place on Saturday and the department and Slager's lawyer said the officer fired in self-defense during a scuffle over his department-issued Taser. Within days, the eyewitness video surfaced and immediately changed perceptions of what happened, leading the department to charge Slager with murder and fire him from the force he'd worked on for five years.

2 women sentenced in slaying of black Mississippi man

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — In a hearing that lasted more than five hours Thursday, a federal judge sentenced two women to the maximum prison terms for their roles in the 2011 death of James Craig Anderson, the last of a series of white-on-black attacks.

U.S. District Judge Henry T. Wingate went out of his way to show relatives and supporters of the two women that their presence in the truck that ran over Anderson in a Jackson parking lot was not an isolated accident but the result of a pattern of

racist behavior.

"I just wonder whether the hatred is just engrained for some particular reason," said Wingate, who in 1984 became the first African-American federal judge in Mississippi. "Then again, that's what race hatred is all about: whites who hate blacks and blacks who hate whites. It's just automatic."

Wingate sentenced 21-year-old Shelbie Brooke Richards of Pearl to eight years in prison after her guilty plea to one count of conspiracy to commit a hate crime and one count of concealing the crime by lying to Jackson police. He sentenced 22-year-old Sarah Adelia Graves of Crystal Springs to five years in prison after her guilty plea to one count of conspiracy to commit a hate crime.

Those were the maximum sentences available under the women's plea agreements. But Wingate said he wished he could send the women away for longer prison terms.

Both women were riding in a truck that ran over James Craig Anderson in June 2011. Anderson died after being beaten and run over. Both apologized to Anderson's family Thursday.

Six white men, sentenced earlier by a different judge, received prison terms ranging from four to 50 years for Anderson's death. Two more men await sentencing by Wingate.

Texas executes man for police officer's 2002 shooting death

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (AP) — Texas prison officials on Thursday executed a man convicted in the slaying of a Dallas-area police officer during a 2002 shootout that followed the killing of a customer outside a convenience store.

Kent Sprouse, 42, became the fifth convicted killer put to death this year in Texas, the nation's most active death penalty state.

Before his execution, Sprouse apologized to the families of his victims and his own family "for all the trouble I've caused everyone." Then he thanked his family members for their support.

"I guess that's it," he said. He took several deep breaths after the execution drug pentobarbital began taking effect, then began snoring. Within a minute, all movement stopped. He was pronounced dead 22 minutes later at 6:33 p.m. CDT.

The U.S. Supreme Court refused to review Sprouse's case in November, and no last-day appeals were filed for him in the courts.

Sprouse was sentenced to death for the October 2002 killing of 28-year-old Harry Marvin Steinfeldt III, a police officer in Ferris, about 20 miles south of Dallas.

Witnesses said Sprouse carried a shotgun into the Ferris Food Mart store, then shot and killed 38-year-old Pedro Moreno, a customer who was pumping gas near him. Sprouse said he believed Moreno was an undercover officer, so he shot him.



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