

Obama arrives in Cuba, first US president to visit in 88 years

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Matt Spetalnick, Daniel Trotta, Jeff Mason & Frank Jack Daniel, Reuters

President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba yesterday on a historic visit, opening a new chapter in US engagement with the island's Communist government after decades of animosity between the former Cold War foes.

Obama landed at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport aboard Air Force One, the presidential jet with 'United States of America' emblazoned across its fuselage, a sight almost unimaginable not long ago.

Stepping down onto the red carpet in a light drizzle, Obama and his family were greeted by Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, the top Cuban official present. The formal welcoming ceremony will be today when Obama meets Cuban President Raul Castro at the presidential palace.

The three-day trip, the first by a US president to Cuba in 88 years, is the culmination of a diplomatic opening announced by Obama and Castro in December 2014, ending a Cold War-era estrangement that began when the Cuban revolution ousted a pro-American government in 1959.

Obama, who abandoned a longtime US policy of trying to isolate Cuba, wants to make his shift irreversible. But major obstacles remain to full normalisation of ties, and the Democratic president's critics at home say the visit is premature.

Underscoring the ideological divide that persists between Washington and Havana, Cuban police, backed by hundreds of pro-government demonstrators, broke up the regular march of a leading dissident group, the Ladies in White, detaining about 50 people just hours before Obama arrived.

Traveling with first lady Michelle Obama, her mother and their daughters, Sasha and Malia, the president met first with staff of the newly reopened US Embassy at a Havana hotel.

The Obamas then took in the sights of Old Havana, drawing cheers from small crowds of Cubans and foreign tourists. Obama was also hosted on a tour of Havana's 18th century cathedral by Cardinal Jaime Ortega, who played a key role in secret talks that led to the rapprochement 15 months ago.

"It's a historic opportunity to engage directly with the Cuban people," Obama told US diplomats.

US officials appeared unfazed by Castro's absence from the airport welcome, even though he personally met and greeted Pope Francis in September. Republican presidential

front-runner Donald Trump tweeted that Obama's visit was a "big deal" but that he got "no respect".

Obama will hold talks with Raul Castro - but not his brother Fidel, the revolutionary leader - and speak to entrepreneurs today. He meets privately with dissidents, addresses Cubans live on state-run media and attends an exhibition baseball game tomorrow.

Both symbolism and substance

The trip carries both symbolism and substance after decades of hostility between Washington and Havana.

It makes Obama the first sitting American president to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge arrived on a battleship in 1928.

It is also another major step in chipping away at remaining barriers to US-Cuba trade and travel and developing more normal relations between Washington and Havana.

Since rapprochement, the two sides have restored diplomatic ties and signed commercial deals on telecommunications and scheduled airline service.

Major differences remain, notably the 54-year-old economic embargo of Cuba. Obama has asked Congress to rescind it, but the move has been blocked by the Republican leadership.

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