

Cuba does not want normal ties with US: Clinton
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Cuba's leadership does not want to normalise ties with Washington because they would "lose their excuses" for the country's economic stagnation, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Friday.

The United States maintains a decades-old trade embargo on the Americas' only one-party Communist regime, but President Barack Obama took office last year offering to improve ties if President Raul Castro improved human rights.

Clinton however blamed Castro and his brother Fidel - Cuba's leader from 1959 to 2008 - for undermining Washington's bid to improve relations.

Despite US efforts to "enhance cooperation," Clinton said that the Castro brothers "do not want to see an end to the embargo and do not want to see normalisation with the United States because they would then lose all their excuses for what hasn't happened in Cuba in the last 50 years," Clinton said.

"I find that very sad, because there should be an opportunity for a transition" to democracy in Cuba," said Clinton, who was answering a student's question during a visit to the University of Louisville in the state of Kentucky.

"The people of Cuba should have democratically elected leaders and a chance to chart their own future. But unfortunately, I don't see that happening while the Castros are still in charge," the top US diplomat said.

'They let people die'

Raul Castro officially became president in 2008 after his older brother was sidelined with serious health problems. However Fidel, now 83, remains enormously influential in Cuban affairs.

Clinton also noted what she said was a growing acknowledgment from the international community that Havana was cracking down on human rights.

"For the first time, a lot of countries that had done nothing but berate the United States for our failure to be more open to Cuba have now started criticizing Cuba because they let people die," she said.

"Many in the world are now seeing what we have seen for a long time, which is a very intransigent, entrenched regime that has stifled the opportunity for the Cuban people."

A leading political prisoner, Orlando Zapata, died in hospital February 23 after 85 days into a hunger strike protesting Cuban prison conditions.

Two other Cuban dissidents - cyber journalist Guillermo Farinas and doctor Darsi Ferrer - are currently engaged in hunger strikes demanding improved conditions.

According to the Cuban Commission on Human Rights (CCDHRN), an illegal but tolerated group on the island, there are some 200 political prisoners in Cuba.

Western 'blackmail'

Raul Castro on April 4 vowed never to give in to the dissidents' demands, calling it "blackmail" organised by the United States and Europe.

The Cuban president charged the United States and Europe with waging "an unprecedented publicity war" against Havana allegedly supported by "major Western media."

- AFP

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