Cuba's Dissident Crackdown Peaks Ahead of Obama's Historic Visit

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Even some supporters of President Barack Obama’s moves to strengthen relations with Cuba are questioning the timing of his planned visit to the Communist island next month, after arrests of dissidents by Raul Castro’s government reached a five-year high.

Obama vowed Thursday that he’ll promote human rights during his historic visit, the first by a sitting American president since 1928. But more than a year of warming relations between the nations, separated by just 90 miles, have so far failed to slow the Cuban government’s crackdown on political dissidents.

The Madrid-based Cuban Observatory on Human Rights said 1,474 people, including 512 women, were “arbitrarily” detained in January. The arrests have been climbing since the December 2014 announcement that the two governments would improve ties.

“A presidential visit should occasion a broader progress on the human-rights agenda. And I haven’t seen any changes on that front,” said Christopher Sabatini, an adjunct professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs who has supported the rapprochement.

Sabatini said Cuba can take a number of steps to show progress ahead of Obama’s March 21-22 visit, including freeing its remaining political prisoners, allowing greater freedom of expression, providing citizens with more access to the Internet or joining the Organization of American States, which would place it under the scrutiny of the regional body’s human rights commission.

**‘Relatively Easy’**

“Some of these are relatively easy to do,” he said. “It’s not like we’re asking them to hold free and fair elections tomorrow.”

Ric Herrero, who heads the #CubaNow advocacy group that seeks to end the five-decade U.S. trade embargo against the island, said “it would have been ideal” for Obama to make the visit later but voiced confidence in his ability to advocate for human rights on the trip. Under the 84-year-old Castro, Cuba’s human-rights record is rated as the worst in the Americas by Freedom House.

Press officials at Cuba’s Ministry of Foreign Relations didn’t immediately respond to questions about the country’s human rights record when contacted by Bloomberg News.

“We still have differences with the Cuban government that I will raise directly,” Obama said Thursday on his Twitter account. “America will always stand for human rights around the world.”

At a news conference after the announcement, Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes said, “We see everything that we’re doing as being in the net positive for the lives and human rights of the Cuban people.” He said long-term detentions have declined.

**Kerry Visit**

The White House said Obama will meet with civil society groups while in Havana, without naming which ones. During a visit to open the U.S. embassy in Havana last year, Secretary of State John Kerry was criticized by human-rights groups for not inviting dissidents to attend the ceremony alongside Cuban officials. He met with them separately later in the day.

“Despite the increase in the dictatorship’s repression, UNPACU believes Obama’s visit will be positive,” Luis Lazaro Guanche, a leader of one of the largest dissident groups, the Patriotic Union of Cuba, said on his Twitter account. The group said separately that the government has raided 20 of its members’ homes in the past three months, the most recent coming on Thursday.

Obama’s visit, the first by a sitting president since Calvin Coolidge arrived for a Latin American summit, follows administration moves aimed at making it easier for tourists to visit and U.S. companies to do business on the island. The president doesn’t have the authority to completely end the trade embargo, put in place after Raul’s brother Fidel took power and confiscated U.S. property in a 1959 revolution. Only Congress can do that.

**Airbnb Business**

Some travel companies have taken advantage of the nascent opening, including Airbnb Inc., which said Cuba is its fastest-growing market with more than 3,000 rooms available less than a year after it [started doing business](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-02/airbnb-s-cuba-gambit-shows-promise-in-spot-u-s-invasion-failed) there.

Yet with companies including American Airlines Group Inc. and Carnival Corp.’s cruise line saying they are eager to do business in Cuba, the island’s government has been slow to change its own restrictions on U.S. companies.

The Cubans “are aware of it, and they are trying to address it,” said Pedro Freyre, the Miami-based chair of Akerman LLP’s international practice who has led business and legal delegations to Cuba. “Part of the problem is that they are overwhelmed. There is a small group of trained professionals and they are vetting these and their desks are just stacked to the ceiling with applications.”

Cuban officials have maintained that the U.S. must fully lift the embargo and return the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base before relations can be fully normalized.

Josefina Vidal, the head of Cuban affairs toward the U.S., said on Thursday that discussions during Obama’s visit should be based on principles of international laws.

“Cuba is open to talks with the U.S. government on any issue, including human rights, which, of course, we have different views on, as there are different ideas and views on other issues such as democracy, political models and international relations,” she said at a news conference in Havana.