**Obama no longer defending America at UN. Refuses to vote against General Assembly condemnation of Cuba embargo**

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The United States on Wednesday abstained for the first time from a United Nations General Assembly vote on a resolution calling for an end to a U.S. economic embargo on Cuba, after opposing such measures every year for 24 years.

For the 25th time, the 193-member General Assembly adopted the resolution with 191 votes in favor. Israel, which opposed the resolution last year, also abstained on Wednesday. Such resolutions are non-binding, but can carry political weight.

Communist-run Cuba and the United States, former Cold War foes, began normalizing relations in 2014. U.S. President Barack Obama has taken steps to ease trade and travel restrictions on Cuba, but only the U.S. Congress can lift the full embargo.

The Republican-controlled Congress has resisted Obama's call to lift Washington's economic embargo after more than 50 years. Republican critics say Obama is making too many concessions to Cuba for too little in return, especially on human rights.

The U.N. General Assembly applauded when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power announced prior to the vote that the United States would abstain.

"Abstaining on this resolution does not mean that the United States agrees with all of the policies and practices of the Cuban government. We do not," Power told the General Assembly.

"We are profoundly concerned by the serious human rights violations that the Cuban government continues to commit with impunity against its own people," she said.

Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez described the abstention as a "positive step for the future of improving relations between the United States and Cuba."

Rodriguez said in September that damage from U.S. sanctions between April 2015 and March 2016 amounted to $4.6 billion and to $125.9 billion since the embargo's inception more than 50 years ago.

In March, Obama made the first visit to Havana by a U.S. president in 88 years. His trip was made possible by his breakthrough agreement with Cuban President Raul Castro in December 2014 to cast aside decades of hostility that began soon after Cuba's 1959 revolution.

Since the opening, Obama has repeatedly used his executive powers to relax trade and travel restrictions, while pushing Cuba to accelerate market-style reforms and boost political and economic freedoms.

The U.N. resolution adopted on Wednesday takes note of the steps taken by Obama as positive but "still limited in scope." It urges the United States to repeal or invalidate the embargo on Cuba as soon as possible.