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Cuban-U.S. Ties Termed Worst in Decades

Havana Cites Absence of Ranking Envoy, Booming Spy Flight

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HAVANA—Relations between the United States and Cuba are the worst in more than two decades, according to a senior Cuban official and western diplomats.

The deep freeze that set in late last year has, among other things, dimmed the hopes of Cubans in both countries for increased transit in both directions, a hope that flickered briefly in 1985.

Cuban officials contrast the impasse with Washington to gains in breaking out of their diplomatic isolation with democratic nations in Latin America. Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay have opened embassies or bolstered their representation in Havana in recent months, they point out.

No single incident brought on the deterioration with the United States, according to both sides. Rather, differences accumulated and attempts at dialogue collapsed over the past two years, leaving Cuban officials expressing bitterness and frustration about the lack of progress. During a weeklong visit by this reporter, Cuban officials repeatedly expressed such sentiments, asking why Washington was ignoring bilateral issues.

"Our relations have dipped lower than what we thought could be the lowest point," said Ricardo Alarcon, a senior Foreign Ministry official who handles U.S.-Cuban affairs. He characterized the chill as the worst since the aftermath of the 1962 crisis, in which the Soviet Union sought to place missiles in Cuba.

The events reached a nadir in early December, when the government ordered a nationwide military mobilization, called Bastion '86, billed as a rehearsal for a U.S. attack. In the midst of it, Alarcon recalled, on Dec. 8, a U.S. SR71 spy plane flew the length of the island, rattling windows with sonic booms along the way.

Although aerial surveillance flights have been frequent for more than two decades, Alarcon said they usually skirted the island. He charged the flight was "deliberately provocative."

Starting on Dec. 9, the government sum-

moned a marathon protest that was to last for three days in front of the U.S. Interests Section, in a seaside plaza dominated by a flashy billboard saying, "Yankee imperialists, we are not afraid of you at all!"

On Dec. 11, most Havana city buses were commandeered to bring more than 400,000 chanting Cubans to the plaza for the largest anti-U.S. demonstration here in at least a decade.

Two days later, Cuba suspended charter flights from Miami, which since 1977 had been bringing U.S. diplomatic pouches and household goods for the American staff of 20. Since then, at least 16 pouches have been delayed or stopped, diplomats said.

Other Cuban measures further complicated the U.S. mission's logistics and curtailed American diplomats' access to events and officials in Havana. Alarcon said the measures put U.S. diplomats here on the same footing as that of Cuba's envoys in Washington. He said that since the early days of the Reagan administration, no Cuban diplomat has been invited to any official function in the U.S. capital.

On Feb. 1, the Interests Section chief, Curtis W. Kamman, was reassigned to Washington. The Havana post remains vacant, for the first time since the section opened in 1977.

Just before Kamman departed, he was called to meet with President Fidel Castro, diplomats said. News of the encounter leaked through the diplomatic corps, but both sides have remained tight-lipped about the discussion.

A dramatic contribution to the frayed relations came last August, when a Cuban made a midday dash up the broad steps to the door of the Interests Section in an apparent desperate lunge for asylum. U.S. diplomats reportedly watched as a Cuban guard shot the man, beat him and led him away.

The government has not revealed his identity or fate, said the western sources, who spoke on the condition that they not be identified further.

Although U.S.-Cuban relations have been strained or nonexistent since Castro came to power in 1959, the current frustration here seems based on a recognition that they are unlikely to improve, at least during the present U.S. administration.

"It's as though the United States learned nothing in more than 25 years of coexistence," said Alarcon. "We feel like we are starting all over again at the beginning."

The United States broke relations in January 1961. The Interests Section, technically an adjunct of the Swiss Embassy, was

opened 16 years later in the same, by then dilapidated, U.S. Embassy building. A vigorously enforced U.S. trade embargo remains in effect.

Three years ago, Castro responded to U.S. demands that he negotiate a return to Cuba of convicts and mentally ill persons who were released to join the 1981 exodus of refugees from the port of Mariel. It was noted at the time that a rapprochement could affect trade issues and help Cuba alleviate its \$4 billion debt to other western nations.

But in May 1985, Castro scuttled the talks when the U.S. government initiated Radio Marti broadcasts beamed at Cuba. At meetings in Mexico City in mid-1986 the two countries failed to reach an accord that might have allowed Cuba some access to U.S. radio waves.

Cuban officials are especially indignant about an unusual showdown that took place in March in Geneva. U.S. United Nations Ambassador Vernon Walters and an American delegation mounted an all-out drive for a motion before the U.N. Human Rights Commission to condemn Cuba for persecuting political opponents.

The United States lost by one vote on March 11. A crucial bloc of six Latin nations sided with Cuba. All the major western powers on the commission backed the United States.

European diplomats here said the United States succeeded in convincing many delegates that there is a pressing human rights problem in Cuba. But a number of Third World countries were alienated by the United States' strong-arm diplomacy, which included personal notes and calls from President Reagan, diplomats said.

Here, top Cuban officials threw a banquet for diplomats of countries that favored them and formally scolded those that did not.

On April 6, in his first public comments about the Geneva debate, Castro called the U.S. effort "dirty, rude and immodest." He claimed that no prisoner had ever been "the subject of physical abuse" in the history of his government. The assertion was widely disbelieved.

But the communist leader ended that speech on an unexpected conciliatory note.

"We do not advocate eternal hostility between Cuba and the United States," he said.