



US-Cuba thaw marks end of 'hard Castro-ism'

AFP, Havana

The decision by the United States and Cuba to renew diplomatic relations marks the end of "hard Castro-ism" on the communist island and a victory for pragmatic diplomacy, analysts said.

Cuban President Raul Castro helped pave the way for Barack Obama to make the politically delicate gesture by toning down the Havana government's anti-American rhetoric after taking over from his older brother Fidel Castro in 2006.

Wednesday's announcement would likely have been impossible under Fidel, the father of the communist island's 1959 revolution, political analysts and diplomats told AFP.

Fidel had carved out an image as the eternal enemy of "American imperialism," an animosity made deeply personal by a string of failed assassination plots by the CIA during the Cold War.

But Raul, 83, has taken baby steps toward economic reform as well as a change in rhetorical style since taking the reins from his 88-year-old brother eight years ago.

Ironically, Raul was long seen as even more of a hardliner than Fidel when he served as his brother's defence minister.

However, he said after taking office that he was willing to negotiate with the US as equals.

The move to end the Cold War standoff likely means the Cuban president was ready to compromise, said one Latin American diplomat.

The release of three Cuban spies from US prisons and an American from a Cuban jail was only "the most visible part of the deal," the diplomat said.

There had been signs of an emerging thaw in US-Cuban relations in recent months.

In October, Cuba has won plaudits including from US Secretary of State John Kerry -- for sending scores of doctors and nurses to fight the Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

In another key moment that was broadcast around the world, Obama and Castro shook hands at Nelson Mandela's funeral in South Africa in December last year.

But many observers said the detente originated one month earlier, when Obama told a fundraising dinner in Miami that it was time to admit the United States' five-decade trade embargo on Cuba had failed.

In Cuba, another key change was Raul Castro's willingness to allow Pope Francis to act as a liaison for talks.

Raul has also made symbolically important reforms at home. Moreover, he no longer calls Cuban emigrants traitors or "worms."

He has continued to rail against the embargo and refused to consider ending one-party communist rule.

But he has also brought a more pragmatic style to Cuban diplomacy, winning the support of other Latin American countries -- reflected in the fact that 30 leaders attended a summit of regional group CELAC in Havana last January.

Russian 'bear' fighting for survival: Putin

AFP, Moscow

Though his country's economy is tanking in part because of Western sanctions, President Vladimir Putin yesterday showed no sign of changing tack on war-torn Ukraine and compared Russia to a bear fighting for survival.

Speaking during his annual end-of-the-year news conference, the Russian strongman, 62, showed no willingness to tone down his fiery anti-Western rhetoric and branded Ukraine's attempt to crush a Moscow-backed separatist uprising in the east of the country a "punitive operation".

Meanwhile, the EU yesterday imposed additional sanctions on Crimea, banning all investment and cruise ships from its ports to force home the message the bloc will not recognise Russia's "illegal annexation" of Ukraine's territory.

At the news conference, Putin tried to quell fears of economic collapse and vowed rapid recovery from the worst financial crisis



of his rule but stressed that his position on Ukraine has not shifted.

He conspicuously chose not to reply to the Ukrainian journalist's question on Russian regular troops, saying instead: "All people who perform their duty following the call of the heart or participate in the fighting voluntarily including in the southeast of Ukraine are not mercenaries because they are not getting any money for it."

"Our (Western) partners have not stopped. They decided that they are winners, they are an empire now and the rest are vassals and they have to be driven into a corner," Putin said.

He accused the West of wanting to tame the legendary Russian bear, the animal symbolising his country, and asserted its real goal was not to punish Moscow for seizing Crimea from Ukraine in March but to undermine Russia's independence.

The Russian strongman singled out the United States, whose Congress has approved fresh sanctions against Russia.



An Indian woman carries her son to school wrapped in a shawl on a cold foggy morning in New Delhi, yesterday. Intense cold wave conditions accompanied by snowfall have left 24 people dead in Uttarakhand state, officials said yesterday. The weatherman has forecast harsher days and said the mercury will drop further.

Obesity can be disability, rules EU court

AFP, Luxembourg

The European Union's highest court yesterday ruled that obesity can be considered a "disability" if it hinders the overweight person's performance at work.

The European Court of Justice had been asked by a Danish court to consider the case of a child minder in Denmark who said he was fired four years ago because he is obese.

The EU court, however, ruled that "no general principle of EU law prohibits, in itself, the discrimination on grounds of obesity."

Islamists kidnap 185 in Nigeria

AFP, Maiduguri

Boko Haram has kidnapped at least 185 people, including women and children, from a Nigerian village, carting the hostages away on trucks towards Sambisa Forest, a notorious rebel stronghold, two local officials and a vigilante leader said yesterday.

The mass abduction, part of an attack that also killed 32 people, occurred Sunday in the village of Gumsuri, Borno state, in the embattled northeast.

Both officials, who requested anonymity, said the local government established the number of those abducted through contacting families, ward heads and emirs.

A vigilante leader based in the Borno state capital Maiduguri, Usman Kakani, told AFP that fighters who were in Gumsuri during the attack provided a figure of 191 abducted, including women, girls and boys.

Gumsuri is roughly 70 kilometres south of Maiduguri and falls on the road that leads to Chibok, where Boko Haram kid-

napped more than 200 schoolgirls in April.

Details of the Gumsuri attack took four days to emerge because the mobile phone network in the region has completely collapsed and many roads are impassable.

Meanwhile, a Nigerian military court on Wednesday sentenced 54 soldiers to death for mutiny after they refused to deploy for an operation against Boko Haram Islamists in the northeast, their lawyer said. "They sentenced 54 to death and acquitted five," said prominent human rights lawyer Femi Falana, following a court martial that began on October 15 and was conducted behind closed doors.

Reporters were turned away from the court before the tribunal gave its verdict and military officials were not available for comment afterwards.

In a similar case in September, 12 soldiers were sentenced to death for mutiny after firing on their commanding officer in the northeast city of Maiduguri, where troops are battling against Boko Haram.

ISIS kills 150 women for refusing marriage

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Iraq's Ministry of Human Rights has claimed that ISIS militants have executed at least 150 women in the Western province of Al-Anbar, Turkish media has reported.

A statement released by the ministry on Tuesday said the militants had attacked women before burying them in mass graves in Fallujah, according to the Anadolu Agency.

"At least 150 females, including pregnant women, were executed in Fallujah [...] after they refused to accept jihad marriage," the statement said.

"Many families were also forced to migrate from the province's northern town of Al-Wafa after hundreds of residents received death threats."

ISIS has overrun a large part of the western Anbar province in its push to expand its territory across swathes of Iraq and Syria.

As a group, ISIS has been responsible for mass executions before. Last month, the militant group shot dead at least 50 men, women and children in a tribe massacre in the province last month.

The attack against the Al Bu Nimir tribe took place in the village of Ras al-Maa, north of Ramadi, the provincial capital. There, the militant group killed at least 40 men, six women and four children.

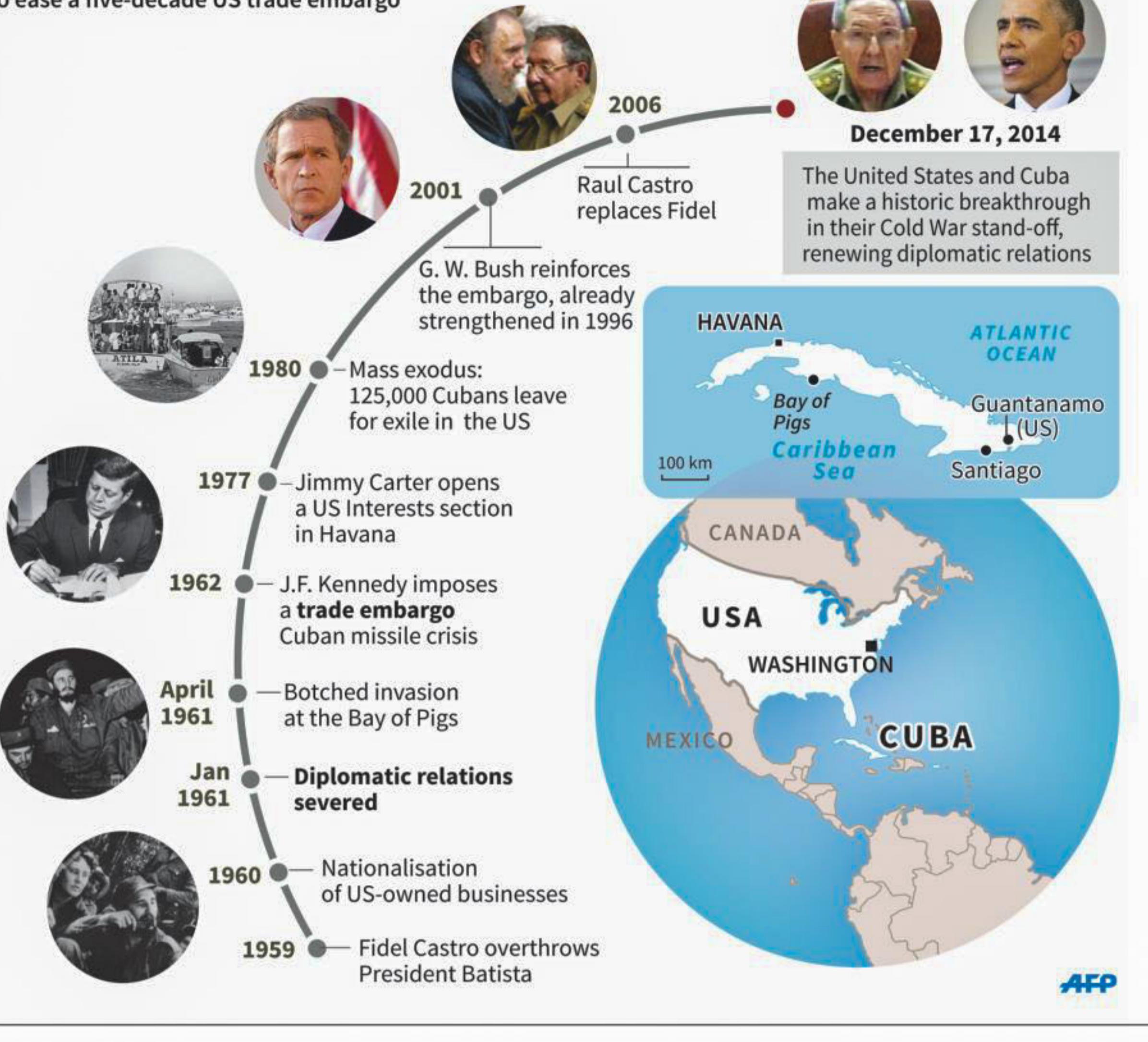
A senior tribesman said they were lined up and publicly killed one by one. An official within the Anbar governor's office corroborated the tribesman's account, according to The Associated Press.

ISIS also recently published what appeared to be an "abhorrent" pamphlet providing its followers with guidelines on how to capture, keep and sexually abuse female slaves.

However, while ISIS has been regularly exposed as spreading misinformation, there are also increasing concerns by some experts that those against the militant group are increasingly spreading misinformation in a bid to undermine it.

The US and Cuba in historic revival of diplomatic ties

Both sides now set to launch measures to ease a five-decade US trade embargo



Global life expectancy rises: Report

REUTERS, London

The latest round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, shepherded by Kerry, collapsed in April amid mutual recriminations.

This summer's 50-day war in Gaza followed, and tensions have boiled over in the West Bank and east Jerusalem with a series of deadly attacks on Israelis and frequent clashes between security forces and stone-throwing Palestinians.

Frustration with the stalled peace process has also grown in Europe, where lawmakers in Britain, France and Spain have all called in recent weeks for the recognition of a Palestinian state.

The Palestinians pushed for action at the United Nations as the European parliament overwhelmingly backed recognition of a Palestinian state, the latest assembly in Europe to adopt a motion to that end.

An EU court on Wednesday ordered the removal of Hamas from its terror black list, drawing an angry response from Netanyahu.

Netanyahu on Wednesday said Europeans appeared to have learned nothing from the Holocaust, after the EU court ruling.

"But we in Israel, we've learned. We'll continue to defend our people and our state against the forces of terror and tyranny and hypocrisy," he said at the start of a meeting with US Republican Senator-elect Joni Ernst.

I've been mistaken for a valet: Obama

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Barack Obama, the United States' first African-American president, has revealed that he has been mistaken for a valet because of the colour of his skin.

"There's no black male my age, who's a professional, who hasn't come out of a restaurant and is waiting for their car and somebody didn't hand them their car keys," Obama told People magazine on Wednesday.

His wife, First Lady Michelle Obama, added that her husband had also once been mistaken for a waiter at a black-tie party and asked for coffee.

Not that Michelle has not experienced the same kind of thing. She said that when she went to Target recently, as the First Lady of the country, she was asked by a fellow shopper to get something from a shelf.

"I think people forget that we've lived in the White House for six years," she said. "Before that, Barack Obama was a



black man that lived on the South Side of Chicago, who had his share of troubles catching cabs."

Obama and the First Lady were speaking in the wake of rising racial tensions in the country following the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. Both men were killed at the hands of white policemen. Both cops did not face any punishment.

The president said racial relations had improved, but progress was needed.

"The small irritations or indignities that we experience are nothing compared to what a previous generation experienced," Obama said. "It's one thing for me to be mistaken for a waiter at a gala. It's another thing for my son to be mistaken for a robber and to be handcuffed, or worse, if he happens to be walking down the street and is dressed the way teenagers dress."

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Murray said a huge increase in collective action and funding given to potentially deadly infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, measles, tuberculosis, HIV and malaria has had a real impact, reducing death rates and extending life expectancy.

But he said some major chronic diseases have been neglected and are rising in importance as threats to life, particularly drug disorders, liver cirrhosis, diabetes and kidney disease.

Murray's team's latest analysis found some poorer countries have made exceptional gains in life expectancy over that time period, with people in Nepal, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Niger, Maldives, East Timor and Iran now living on average 12 years longer.