

# MTSU professor: Cuba action 'bold'

Aldo Amato 8:51 p.m. CST December 17, 2014



(Photo: AP)

MURFREESBORO – President Barack Obama's announcement Wednesday on improved U.S.-Cuba relations should be viewed as historic, but also carefully, according to a Spanish-language professor at Middle Tennessee State University.

Richard Morris, who travels to Cuba every year, called the president's announcement Wednesday a "bold move."

Obama Wednesday announced the re-establishment of diplomatic relations as well as an easing in economic and travel restrictions on Cuba, declaring an end to America's "outdated approach" to the island in a historic shift that aims to bring an end to a half-century of Cold War enmity, according to the Associated Press.

The announcement followed an agreement that included a prisoner exchange. The agreement includes Cuba's release of Alan Gross, an American citizen arrested in 2009 on espionage charges for trying to provide Internet service to Cuban residents. Obama spoke with Gross by phone as he flew back to the United States.

The United States, meanwhile, agreed to release three Cubans accused of spying and imprisoned here, officials told USA Today.

While Obama seeks to end the 53-year-old embargo, which requires approval from Congress, Morris was quick to point out that the embargo is still in effect.

"It is not an invitation to tourists or free trade," Morris said. "The embargo is still very much in effect and there is no such thing as Cuban tourism yet. However, with today's announcement, both nations are more open than they once were."

Morris said the approach of Raul Castro, Cuba's president and brother of former leader Fidel Castro, is to be pragmatic, rather than adopting a U.S. style of democracy. He added that until Cuba makes several changes, including eliminating communism, he does not see a way for the embargo to end.

"I think this will lead to a lot of speculating as to what the United States is doing," he said. "The (Cuban) perception of Obama has been very measured since he took office in 2008. Things between Cuba and the United States did not change quickly. I just don't see the embargo being lifted. But I see Democratic presidents start to whittle away at it like the president did today."

Meanwhile, the president's announcement garnered mixed reactions in the Cuban community, according to USA Today. Many in Cuba met the news of the release of the three Cubans with joy while Cuban-Americans criticized the exchange.

Sen. Marco Rubio, a Cuban-American Republican from Florida, said he rejoiced at Gross' release, USA Today reported. But he condemned the rest of the deal as "the latest in a long line of failed attempts by President Obama to appease rogue regimes at all cost."

"(Rubio) feels like this set's a dangerous precedent," Morris said. "It kind of opens a door that is hard to close."

U.S. residents will be allowed to travel to Cuba, according to USA Today. Licenses will be available for trips related to family visits; official business of the U.S. government, foreign governments and certain intergovernmental organizations; journalistic activity; professional research and professional meetings; and educational activities.

Also on the travel list are religious activities; public performances, clinics, workshops, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions; support for the Cuban people; humanitarian projects; activities of private foundations or research or educational institutes; exportation, importation or transmission of information or information materials; and certain export transactions that may be considered for authorization under existing regulations and guidelines.

"Licensed U.S. travelers to Cuba will be authorized to import \$400 worth of goods from Cuba, of which no more than \$100 can consist of tobacco products and alcohol combined," said a White House statement on the new policy.

Morris takes a group of students from MTSU to Cuba every year. He said while he does not see the embargo being lifted within the next decade, he sees more efficient travel between the two countries.

"I don't think we'll be at a point like we were in the 1940s where people could travel to Cuba for the weekend," he said. "But I see travel becoming more accessible even if the embargo is not lifted."

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