

## **Cuban embassy flag-raising draws Castro opponents, supporters**

Washington (dpa) - Pro-Castro demonstrators in front of the Cuban embassy chanted in Spanish: "Fidel, the people are with you."

On the opposite side of 16th Street in Washington's well-heeled North-West quarter, Cuban refugee Aimel Rios heard the slogan - "Fidel el pueblo está contigo" - and dismissed the Castro supporters as "relics of the Cold War."

Rios, attending Monday's flag-raising ceremony at the newly opened Cuban embassy, pointed out that under the regime of revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, who is now ailing and retired, and his brother and successor, President Raul Castro, Cuba has lacked competitive, multi-party elections.

"They've never voted in a free and democratic election since 1948, so how do they know that [Cubans support the Castros]?" Rios asked. "What we're asking here is to give all Cubans the right to participate in free and democratic elections."

The 37-year-old, who came to the United States in 1999, said he attended the event to raise awareness about systematic human rights violations in Cuba.

A colour-guard raised Cuba's red-white-and-blue flag on a newly erected flagpole in front of the stone embassy, which for decades has housed the Cuban Interests Section in the absence of formal relations with Washington.

Hundreds of spectators including dozens of demonstrators - both pro- and anti-Castro - attended the event, with police barriers outside the embassy grounds to control the crowd. A large, pink banner from anti-war protest group Code Pink was adorned with hearts and said: "To Cuba with love."

Rios said it remains "to be seen" if increased trade between the two countries will be good for the Cuban economy, in the wake of the diplomatic rapprochement in recent months between Washington and Havana.

The US government and European Union should continue demanding that Cuba respect human rights and labour rights. he said.

"We do not want architects, engineers and doctors working in hotels and as taxi drivers. We want them to maximize the human capital and their potential," Rios said. "If the Cubans do not have the right to carry out a strike, when they feel like their labour rights are being violated, then it's going to be a problem."

Despite the reopening of diplomatic ties, the embargo on trade with Cuba remains written in US law. President Barack Obama has called for Congress to act, but with little hope for repeal with the House and Senate both controlled by the conservative opposition Republican Party.

Agustin Aravado, 43, a native of El Salvador, stood among people chanting "lift the embargo now" and "viva Cuba, viva Fidel." He said that the reopening of the embassy was a step forward in improving relations between Cuba and what he called "the most powerful economy in the world."

"It is very important that we lift the embargo as soon as possible," Arevado said. "That is going to increase the relations between the people of both countries."

Evelyn Gonzalez, 57, another Salvadoran native, said she supported normalization with the United States - if that is what Cuba wants.

She praised the Castro brothers' leadership: "Cuba has invested in its people. They have a democracy, and what they need is the US to [get its] hands off their politics and their economics."

Opponents of the regime called for democracy on the communist island and chanted "No Castro, no problem."

<http://www.dpa-international.com/news/international/refilesidebarcuban-embassy-flag-raising-draws-castro-opponents-supportersjordyn-noennig-dpa-a-46015757.html>