



Limits lifted; Cuban Americans make travel plans

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As political leaders debate President Obama's decision Monday to significantly alter U.S. policy toward Cuba, Lourdes Castro is clearing her calendar.

The Miami cosmetologist has a brother, sister and plenty of cousins back in her home city of Havana. She visited them last July and wouldn't have been eligible to see them again until 2011 under restrictions enacted under the Bush administration. Now, Castro is already planning her return.

"I'm going to go as often as I can," said Castro, 52, who is not related to Cuban President Raul Castro, or his brother, Fidel. "I'm so happy."

Obama's wide-ranging order wipes out the restriction that limited Cuban Americans to one trip every three years to the island. They can fly down as often as they want. Also under the new policy, Cuban Americans can send unlimited amounts of money to relatives in

Cuba. The Bush policy limited these remittances to \$1,200 a year.

SUMMIT PREVIEW: Obama may face pressure over ties with Cuba

Tessie Aral is president of ABC Charters, which operates direct flights from Miami to Havana and other Cuban cities. She said she had to lay off about 30% of her staff in 2004 when the Bush administration implemented the travel restrictions.

Although there was no rush to the airport after the White House announcement Monday, Aral said she's waiting for it.

"They're making their plans to go," she said. "This is important. I definitely see more flights for the future."

News of Obama's decision had not spread Monday afternoon in Cuba, where state-controlled media are the main sources of information.

Vladimiro Roca predicts the reaction will be huge. The former economist, who has been jailed for his opposition to the Castro regime, said Cubans already had a positive impression of Obama.

"We will continue suffering, but the suffering will be less. The people are going to appreciate this," Roca said by phone from his Havana home.

Some Cuban Americans, including members of Congress from Florida, said more travel and aid will only embolden Cuba's communist rulers. A joint statement from Reps. Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, Florida Republicans who are Cuban American, called Monday's move a "serious mistake."

"Unilateral concessions to the dictatorship embolden it to further isolate, imprison and brutalize pro-democracy activists," the statement read.

Obama has said he has no plans of altering the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba enacted in 1962 after the United States cut off diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's government until he sees some change in the economic and political system. Amnesty International says hundreds of Cubans are serving prison terms simply for voicing their opposition to the regime.

The new Cuba policy comes days before Obama attends a summit with Latin American leaders who have urged the United States to moderate its stance toward Cuba's communist government.

Frank Calzon, executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based **Center for a Free Cuba**, said the order will take

much of the pressure off Obama and puts the onus to change squarely on Raul Castro.

"(Obama) has positioned himself so he can go to this meeting and say, 'OK, my friends, I have taken the first step. Now it's up to you to put the pressure on the Cuban government,'" Calzon said.

Obama expanded the list of things that can be sent to Cuba, such as clothing, personal hygiene items and fishing gear. The policy still prohibits sending items to senior Cuban government officials and Communist Party members. Telecommunication companies can seek cellphone and television services linking Cuba and the USA.

The goal is to enhance freedom by giving Cubans some independence from their government, said Dan Restrepo, senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council.

"It's very important to help open up space so the Cuban people can work on the kind of grass-roots democracy that is necessary to move Cuba to a better future," he said.