

INTERVIEW - Cuba "slams door" on better ties: ex-US drug czar

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By Pascal Fletcher

MIAMI (Reuters) - Cuba's leadership has "slammed the door" on improving relations with the United States by fiercely and publicly attacking President Barack Obama, a retired U.S. general who backs better ties with Havana said on Monday.

General Barry McCaffrey, a former head of the U.S. military Southern Command and former White House drug czar in the Clinton administration, said he was disappointed by a recent barrage of high-level official Cuban criticism of Obama, who last year pledged to seek a new beginning in U.S.-Cuban ties.

"It was an opportunity for the Cubans to come out of the box, get back into the community of nations ... They walked away from it," the retired four-star general told Reuters in a telephone interview.

Citing Cuba's "shallow and vitriolic" criticism, McCaffrey, who has advocated dismantling the longtime U.S. embargo against the communist-ruled Caribbean island and increasing contacts, last month canceled a planned Jan. 3-6 visit to Havana. This would have discussed ways of improving cooperation and ties.

McCaffrey's visit to Cuba was to have been sponsored by the Washington-based Center for International Policy think tank, which has backed greater engagement with Cuba.

In a sign that an apparent initial "honeymoon" between Cuba's rulers and Obama had come to an end, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez last month called the U.S. president "imperial, arrogant" and accused him of lying during the U.N. global climate change conference in Copenhagen.

This capped recent increasing public criticism of Obama and his administration by Cuban President Raul Castro and former leader Fidel Castro, now 83, who after early praise for the much younger U.S. leader has now reverted to calling him "the Yankee president" and the "imperial chief."

"I find it unbelievable that they would attack the first president that was 92 percent probable to get them out of the box," McCaffrey said, referring to Obama's assertions last year that he wanted to reset long hostile U.S.-Cuban ties.

"They (the Cubans) slammed the door," added McCaffrey, who now runs his own Virginia-based consulting firm.

After initially welcoming Obama's inauguration last year, Cuba's leadership has accused him of not doing enough to change Washington's Cuba policy, and especially of not lifting longstanding U.S. economic sanctions.

Obama, who last year slightly eased some aspects of the U.S. embargo, in turn urged Cuba's rulers to reciprocate by improving human rights and introducing greater political freedom. Havana said this was meddling in its affairs.

"LOCK DOWN THE ISLAND"

McCaffrey, who met both Raul and Fidel Castro during a 2002 visit to Cuba in which he urged Havana and Washington to cooperate against drug-trafficking, said the "1960s rhetoric" coming from Cuba was a "bad signal" for U.S.-Cuban relations.

He said the recent attacks on Obama by the top public figures of the Cuban leadership appeared to be a deliberate policy aimed at scotching rapprochement at a time when the U.S. leader faced multiple domestic and foreign policy challenges.

McCaffrey said the Castros and other Cuban leaders had opted against reform openings. "In my view, I fear, they have decided they have got to lock down the island," he said.

McCaffrey also faulted the Obama administration for not moving more quickly and doing more to build better relations.

He said the Obama administration should have unilaterally lifted U.S. restrictions against Cuba not subject to formal Congress oversight and also closed down the U.S. military detention center at Guantanamo Bay.

In a possible further hiccup to improved ties, Cuba last month arrested a U.S. government contractor it said was supplying opposition groups with satellite communication equipment. President Castro said it showed Washington had not given up on trying to destroy Cuba's socialist system.

(Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

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