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Russia's Lavrov Praises Thaw in U.S.-Cuban Relations in Havana

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Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov addresses Human Rights Council at UN in Geneva, March 2, 2015.

HAVANA — Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has praised the thaw in U.S.-Cuban relations during a six-hour stop in Havana, his first visit here since the United States and Cuba agreed to restore diplomatic ties.

Lavrov, on a Latin American tour that will also take him to Colombia, Nicaragua and Guatemala, met with President Raul Castro and other top Cuban officials on Tuesday.

"Normalization between the United States and Cuba makes us happy. We salute this rapprochement," Lavrov said via interpreter in video carried on Venezuela's Telesur network.

U.S. President Barack Obama reversed longstanding Cuba policy in December, agreeing with Castro to restore diplomatic relations and seek to end more than five decades of animosity between the old Cold War rivals.

The change has led to bilateral talks in Havana and Washington, with the two sides potentially

reaching an agreement on diplomatic relations before Obama and Castro both attend a regional summit in Panama in April.

Obama also wants to end the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba but cannot do so without approval from the Republican-controlled Congress.

"We call for the lifting of the [U.S.] trade and financial blockade of Cuba as soon as possible," Lavrov said.

Cuba has repaired its relations with Russia, which were severely strained after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the new Russian government cut off generous subsidies to Cuba, leading to a protracted economic crisis.

Oil-rich Venezuela has since replaced Moscow as chief benefactor to Cuba's Communist government.

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