

Honeymoon cancelled

A familiar mistrust descends

Zapata, a martyr for human rights THE Cubans who hawk second-hand books from makeshift stalls in Havana's Plaza de Armas were thrilled when Barack Obama was elected. Could millions of American tourists be far behind, they wondered. Word went out that the vendors were in the market for pre-revolutionary American paraphernalia such as Life magazines and Coca-Cola signs or newspapers from the Spanish-American War. But hopes that Mr Obama and his Cuban counterpart, Raúl Castro, would end a 50-year freeze in relations between their countries have proved wildly premature.

Mr Obama began with some gestures. Last April his administration lifted curbs on visits and remittances by Cuban-Americans imposed by George Bush. It also said that it would allow American firms to provide telecoms services to Cuba. It quietly switched off an electronic ticker-tape on the wall of the United States' Interest Section in Havana which had relayed news (propaganda, complained the Cubans, who erected a barricade to obscure it). The administration also restarted talks on practical issues, such as migration, that had been halted under Mr Bush.

The latest round of talks took place in late February. They were overshadowed by familiar rows. The American officials demanded the release of Alan Gross, who was working under contract to USAID and was arrested in Havana in December. His family says he was helping Jewish groups in Cuba set up satellite-based internet connections; Cuba accuses him of spying. The American delegation also met a group of dissidents. That prompted a furious statement from Cuba's foreign ministry that the visitors were less interested in improving relations than in "promoting subversion to overthrow the Cuban revolution".

Four days after the talks Orlando Zapata, an imprisoned dissident, died in custody in a Havana hospital after an 85-day hunger strike in protest at his treatment in jail. That prompted an outcry from international human-rights groups. Hundreds of police prevented all but a few dissidents from attending his funeral in his home town in eastern Cuba.

Mr Zapata, a bricklayer from a poor family, was arrested in 2003 during a crackdown against Cuba's small opposition movement. Not among the better-known dissidents, he was initially sentenced to three years for "disrespecting authority", increased to 25 after he took part in prison protests. Mr Castro said that he regretted Mr Zapata's death. The government insisted he was a common criminal. Certainly his death has embarrassed Mr Castro, as well as Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who was visiting Cuba at the time but refused to condemn it.

However disgruntled they are with the everyday failures of the communist government, few Cubans dare brave the harassment meted out to active opponents. Those in the United States who argue that the American economic embargo merely serves to shore up the Castro regime hoped that Mr Obama's team would agree with them. But it has become clear that the administration is not prepared to do battle with supporters of the embargo in Congress. Attempts to lift the ban on Americans travelling to the island have bogged down. "We made a big initial effort, but got nothing back" from the Cuban government, a State Department official said. Mr Castro has been emphatic that Cuba's communist system is not up for negotiation with the United States.

In December a judge in Miami resented to long prison terms two of five Cuban agents arrested in 1998 for spying on anti-Castro Cuban-Americans. In January the administration

included Cuba as one of just 14 countries on a terrorist watch list under which airline passengers must undergo extra screening before flying.

That provoked a diplomatic protest from Cuba, and the first government-organised anti-American rallies across the island since illness forced Fidel Castro to step down as president in 2006. When Raúl Castro announced Mr Gross's arrest he said it proved that the Obama administration was out to topple the government and was no different from its predecessors. The honeymoon is over before it began.

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