

Cubans hope Obama's win means 'better times ahead'

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HAVANA – It didn't take long for Cubans to hear about the success of Barack Obama.

The girl's dorm at Havana's V.I. Lenin High School broke into cheers after 17-year-old Gabriela Sanchez received a cell phone text message from her mom watching the U.S. election results on satellite TV.

Housewife Rosa Llanos heard the news on short wave radio and thought about her daughter and grandchild living in South Florida. She wants Obama to stick to his promise to lift current U.S. restrictions that limit family visits to once every three years.



EPA

A woman combs her hair as she watches the news on Cuban TV about the newly-elected U.S. President Barack Obama, in Havana, Cuba on Wednesday.

That same wish was echoed by child psychiatrist Ana Teresa Martinez who sees young patients suffering from "the trauma of families divided by the Straits of Florida."

All through the night, Fernanda Hernandez spoke with her sibling Patricia, calling from Miami with regular election updates. These sisters too want changes in U.S. policy with Cuba.

Car mechanic Boris Ruiz working the night shift heard the news on Cuban TV and immediately called his wife. "I woke her up but I needed to tell someone the good news," Ruiz said.

For the first time in his life, Ruiz sees "a chance to normalize relations with the United States and

that will make my life better."

Hoping for an easing of restrictions

Like 73 percent of Cuba's population, Ruiz was born after Fidel Castro came to power and the U.S. severed diplomatic relations with the island.

From the start of the U.S. presidential campaign, Cubans gravitated to Obama. That early sentiment grew into resounding support after the Democratic candidate vowed to ease family limits on travel and lift the cap on how much money Cuban-Americans can send home to family.

Many Cubans, like retired economist Ileana Yarza, expect Obama to be the president who will write a new chapter in US-Cuba relations. "Obama has the youth to look beyond 50 years of failed policy," Yarza said.

While Obama has indicated that his administration would be willing to meet with the Cuban government, he and his advisers have stated that any easing of the nearly five-decade old trade embargo would only come after the Cuban government took concrete steps toward significant democratic change.

Still, Yarza and many here hold out hope: "He will come to realize that trade and tourism is good for both our countries."

Rev. Juan Ramon de la Paz, who has kept a close eye on the U.S. election, watched and applauded Obama's victory speech. "I think Obama will respect Latin America," said Rev. de la Paz. "He believes in dialogue and diplomacy."

He insists that his government too is open to talk.

In the past, the Cuban government has offered to sit down at a bargaining table with the United States without setting any preconditions. Since becoming president, Raúl Castro has personally repeated that offer at least three times but it was never given serious consideration by the current administration.

President Bush has instead pursued a hard-line policy with Cuba's ruling Communist Party and tightened the embargo to bring about democratic openings.

'We'll just have to wait and see'

Despite the overall optimism among Cubans, a group of teenagers listening to music in a city park are still skeptical when it comes to Obama.

"It's one thing to make promises during an election. It's another thing to make them come true," said Pepe Martinez. "We'll just have to wait and see what he does."

Cuba's rulers also are voicing caution.

In a newspaper column published Tuesday morning, former Cuban leader Fidel Castro warned that "the world's pressing problems are not a major source of concern to Obama."

Obama's first challenges, Castro wrote, will be to address critical problems with the U.S. economy, education and health care.

Still, the idealism felt by many Cubans is hard to squelch.

Musician Tulio Praredo, who watched the election returns in a Havana bar, said, "I just know there's better times ahead."