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France's Hollande meets with Fidel Castro

12/05/2015



French President François Hollande on Monday in this capital met with retired Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

The meeting between the French leader and the 88-year-old Fidel lasted about 40 minutes, a French diplomat told Efe.

After being received by Fidel Castro, Hollande continued with his agenda by placing a floral offering before the monument to Cuban founding father Jose Marti at the Plaza of the Revolution, going from there to meet with President Raul Castro, Fidel's younger brother.

In a lecture earlier Monday at the University of Havana, Hollande stressed his country's support for the end of measures "that have harmed Cuba so much," in a reference to the 52-year-old U.S. economic embargo against the island.

"France will do all she can to help in new decisions, to consolidate the opening, to see that the measures that have so badly harmed Cuba's development can finally be lifted, repealed," he said.

The French head of state's historic journey to Cuba comes amid a diplomatic thaw between Washington and Havana, who have been holding talks on the re-opening of embassies.

Hollande said that his visit, the first by a president of France to Cuba, aims not only to strengthen, but to expand relations between Paris and Havana.

After Hollande's speech at the university, the governments of France and Cuba signed a number of agreements to increase the number of scholarships available for Cuban students in French universities.

Hollande met earlier Monday with Cuba's Catholic primate, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, and then inaugurated the new

Havana headquarters of the Alliance Française.

Hollande is set to leave Cuba early Tuesday for Haiti.

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