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US, Cuba to meet next week on re-opening embassies

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The United States and Cuba will hold a new meeting next week in Washington on re-opening embassies, the latest step in their historic rapprochement, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said on Wednesday (May 13).

"Next week there will be a new round of negotiations in Washington on re-establishing diplomatic relations and opening embassies," he told AFP in an exclusive interview. The exact date has not yet been set, he said.

The two sides have held several rounds of talks since the landmark announcement by US President Barack Obama and Cuba's Raul Castro on Dec 17 that the former Cold War foes would restore the diplomatic ties they severed in 1961.

The negotiations are being led by US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson and Cuba's top diplomat for US affairs, Josefina Vidal.

Rodriguez said the talks had made "considerable" progress on the issue of allowing the Cuban diplomatic mission in Washington to open a bank account, which it has not been able to do because of the trade and financial embargo the United States has imposed on the communist island since 1962.

The last talks between the two sides took place on Mar 16 in Havana. It was followed in April by a highly symbolic meeting between Obama and Castro at the Summit of the Americas in Panama.

Obama then notified Congress of his intention to take Cuba off the blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism, a key sticking point in the negotiations. Removal from the blacklist will enable Cuba to access badly needed financing from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Castro said on Tuesday the talks were "going well," and that the countries could exchange ambassadors once Cubans removed from the blacklist. That is set to take place after May 29, the expiration date of a 45-day

period for Congress to oppose the move.

Obama's Republican opponents have until then to pass a joint resolution against it in both houses of Congress, but would likely struggle to muster the votes needed to override a presidential veto.

The State Department was more circumspect on the question of exchanging ambassadors, saying no date had yet been set. It said on Wednesday prior to Rodriguez's remarks that diplomatic relations had to be re-established before ambassadors could be named.

"We're not at a point yet where we have reached successful conclusion of our talks to reestablish diplomatic relations and to establish embassies in each other's capitals," said State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke.

"We see the exchange of ambassadors as being a logical step once the reestablishment of diplomatic relations is complete. Not the other way around. So we do not have a set timeframe for the conclusion of the talks on reestablishing diplomatic relations."