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U.S. admits full normalization with Cuba impossible until embargo is lifted

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The United States admitted Tuesday that no "complete" normalization of relations with Cuba can occur until the trade embargo against the island is lifted, something that will only be resolved over the "long term," and it said that the round of talks to be held this week will deal with the last obstacles to opening embassies in the two capitals.

A top U.S. official, who requested anonymity, spoke Tuesday with reporters about the upcoming fourth round of negotiations to reestablish diplomatic ties between the two countries, talks that will be held on Thursday in Washington.

Cuban President Raul Castro said last week that when he names an envoy to the United States what he will be doing is "expanding" relations, but to get to the normalization phase "the blockade must be completely eliminated and the Guantanamo base must be returned."

The United States says that the normalization of relations must come before the opening of embassies but the female U.S. official said Tuesday that she agrees, in part, with Castro.

She said in a telephone press conference that there is probably a difference in how the two sides interpret things, but the difference is not as wide as some believe.

The official also emphasized that restoring diplomatic relations is the "first step," after which appointing ambassadors will occur, and noted that U.S. President Barack Obama had already asked Congress to lift the embargo.

She admitted that completely normal relations between states do not include economic embargoes or sanctions and, in that sense, Castro is partly right, but altering that situation is part of a long-term normalization.

Nevertheless, the official said that the "status" of the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo is not being dealt with in the

talks to reestablish relations and will not be discussed on Thursday.

The official also said that Obama has made clear that he is not interested in having that conversation and that the only thing that had been agreed to with Castro - for the moment, that is - was to reestablish relations.

Regarding Castro's concern that the U.S. Interests Section in Havana is providing "classes" to "independent journalists," the official said that it is no secret that the Cubans do not like U.S. programs on democracy, but at present there is no plan to change or cancel that program, emphasizing that academics and journalists are teaching those classes, not U.S. diplomatic personnel.

The official also said that May 29 is the deadline for Congress to decide on Obama's move to take Cuba off the list of terrorism-sponsoring nations, although it could take "a day or two" longer before it is published in the federal register, adding that she knew of no effort in Congress to block removing Cuba from the list.

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