

---

**US Chamber of Commerce chief defends visit to Cuba**

29/05/2014



The head of the US Chamber of Commerce defended his visit to Cuba on Wednesday after coming under fire from critics in the US Congress who contend the trip is a publicity coup for the communist government. Chamber president Thomas Donohue said his agenda was unhindered by the Cuban authorities and he was confident he was getting a "fair look" at Cuba, after which the influential lobbying group would report its findings to its "friends" in the United States.

Donohue, a champion of capitalism and free enterprise, has long opposed US economic sanctions against the communist-ruled island, seeing them as an impediment to US business interests.

He and a small group of US business leaders are in the middle of a three-day visit, in part to support the market-oriented reforms enacted by President Raul Castro that have created a fledgling private sector.

"I've been free to go where I want. I'm talking to people from the private and the public sector," Donohue told reporters while visiting a private cooperative emblematic of the reforms. "We're going to meet with small businesses. We're meeting with people from other countries that are operating here. I think we'll get a fair look and we're enjoying ourselves."

Upon the announcement of the trip a week ago, US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from south Florida, blasted the visit as "just another Potemkin village tour."

As Donohue began his tour on Tuesday, US Senator Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, expressed concerns it would strengthen a government that "jails foreign business leaders without justification, violates international labour standards and denies its citizens their basic rights."

Donohue countered that many others in Congress and the private sector differ from the pro-embargo lobby, which has sought to undermine and isolate Cuba since its 1959 revolution.

"The great thing about the United States is that everybody is entitled to their opinion including the members of the Congress and the Senate. We happen to have a different view. We think this is a very positive opportunity," Donohue said.

---