

**CUBA**

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# White House adviser: Obama may invoke Cuban exiles in Havana

## HIGHLIGHTS

The White House aide who's helping Obama write his historic Havana speech visited Miami soliciting advice

Ben Rhodes revealed Obama would be traveling with four Cabinet members — and the first lady

Dissidents who flew in from the island were among those Rhodes met with in Miami





BY CAROL ROSENBERG

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Expect President Barack Obama to invoke the ingenuity and success of Cuban-American exiles in his address later this month in Havana, a key White House aide said in Miami on Friday during a listening tour ahead of the president's historic three-day trip to Cuba.

Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes said there's no agreement yet on whether state-run Cuban radio will broadcast Obama's speech in Cuba, a first by an American president since the 1959 revolution. But Rhodes, a sometimes speechwriter for the president, said he has a role in the address, which is being influenced by his talks with South Floridians.

"I've been struck by how much that speech is a focus for people," said Rhodes, who spent the day in downtown Miami, mostly on the Miami Dade College campus, inviting input and trying to assure anxious or angry exiles ahead of the president's March 20-22 visit to Havana.

He held a succession of meetings, many closed, with students, activists, journalists and religious and community leaders, where he reminded them that the White House goal isn't to topple the Castro government but to open up society through renewed diplomatic relations, trade and other ties.

Of the speech, he said, "There has not been an opportunity for an American president to stand in Cuba, in Havana, and speak to the Cuban people, and to speak to the Cuban people in Cuba and in the United States. We feel that weight."

So he laid out several themes to expect in the speech, from "some reckoning with history" to "the history and example of the Cuban-American people and the success they have had here in Miami and across the country."

The two sides have not yet settled on a site for the speech. Rhodes, however, predicted the venue would be indoors, citing logistics and security reasons, and setting to rest the possibility that he would follow in the footsteps of Pope Francis' September visit. The

pontiff did his open-air Mass in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución — with a huge portrait of Che Guevara staring down.

“I think he'll want to speak to a very complicated history that kind of led us to where we are today,” said Rhodes. “How do we find ourselves at this moment. Some of that history is a powerful and positive shared experience. But some of it is a very painful and complicated and contentious experience.”

In one meeting hosted by Cuban American National Foundation chairman Jorge Mas Santos, Rhodes huddled with critics of the regime. “We are one people,” Mas declared, once journalists were allowed inside to listen. “Do not allow the regime to marginalize us.”



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In the room at the time were dissident Martha Beatriz Roque, in town for just a few days, as well as Santiago Province activist Carlos Amiel Oliva Torres of the Union Patriotic de Cuba, and Leticia Ramos of the Ladies in White, both of whom arrived in Miami on Thursday and were returning to the island Saturday.

Rhodes cast the speech as proposing a vision for future relations between the two countries and the two peoples. “He’ll be saying this not as a president who wants to impose a political system on Cuba,” he said. Rather, he’ll show the Cubans “what we believe in.”

Rhodes sent mixed signals on how far the administration would go to ensure that Miami-based journalists, especially Cuban-born reporters who have been unable to get visas, would be allowed on the island to cover Obama in Cuba.

The schedule was still in flux but Rhodes said Obama would attend an exhibition baseball game put on by the Tampa Bay Rays. Rhodes said he expected Raúl Castro to attend, noting “baseball is a language that is shared by Americans and Cubans.”



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Rhodes also disclosed in Miami that Obama would be accompanied by the first lady, and four Cabinet members — Secretary of State John Kerry, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker and Maria Contreras-Sweet, administrator of the Small Business Administration. Rhodes pledged a bipartisan representation of Congress would also accompany the president, but said the list was not yet set.

“There is no question we have profound differences with the Cuban political system,” Rhodes said. But he insisted again and again that White House policy was to help empower a civil society by easing isolation and reaching out to the self-employed. “Our engagement is both with the government and people of Cuba.”

Rhodes said the topic of returning the U.S. Navy base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, was not up for discussion in the three-day visit, although he said the Cuban government would no doubt raise it.

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