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ROME (Reuters) - Cuba has not made any demands on Pope Benedict for him to condemn the 50-year-old U.S. embargo on the island when he visits next month but would welcome a new pronouncement if he decides to make it, Cuba's ambassador to the Vatican said on Wednesday.

In a wide-ranging interview, Ambassador Eduardo Delgado Bermudez also said a possible meeting between Benedict and Fidel Castro was not on the programme "for now" but could not exclude it. He said Castro was in "excellent" overall health.

Delgado, 69, said Cuba saw the visit by Benedict as an opportunity to further deepen Church-state relations on the communist island, which have improved tremendously since the historic 1998 visit by Pope John Paul, who condemned the embargo several times.

"Frankly speaking, we have no 'shopping list' for this visit," he told Reuters at the Cuban embassy, near the Vatican.

"We will receive him with respect and appreciation. That is our greatest desire, both of the government and the people of Cuba, and not just the Catholics," he said in Spanish.

The embargo, which marked its 50th anniversary on Feb. 7 and which Cubans call "the blockade", is still the cornerstone of U.S. policy toward the Caribbean island 90 miles (145 km) from Florida, although it has failed to meet its primary objective of undermining the Castro government.

Washington imposed the near-total trade embargo at the height of the Cold War to punish Havana for its support of the Soviet Union and in the hope it would bring an end to communism on the island. Cuba says the embargo has cost the island nearly \$1 trillion, a figure many experts consider inflated.

"The position of the Holy See is against the embargo, which is the position of 99.99 percent of humanity," Delgado said, noting that every fall at the United Nations General Assembly, a vast majority of nations backed a resolution condemning it.

"We are not asking anything specific from the pope but if His Holiness feels that there has to be a new pronouncement (on the embargo), he will do it. But Cuba has not made any requests or set any pre-conditions ... we are not asking, we are not begging, we are not soliciting for the help of others," he said.

"It would be welcome it but it's not that we're hoping for it (at all costs)," he said.

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