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Sent: Wednesday, September 14, 2011 9:43 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Richardson to leave Cuba bitter, with no prisoner
Importance: High

From: Hammer, Michael A
Sent: Wednesday, September 14, 2011 9:23 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Cc: Toiv, Nora F; Laszczych, Joanne
Subject: Richardson to leave Cuba bitter, with no prisoner
Importance: High

As mentioned this am.

Richardson to leave Cuba bitter, with no prisoner

By PAUL HAVEN, Associated Press –

HAVANA (AP) — Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson said Tuesday that he would leave Cuba after exhausting all possible avenues to try to win the release of a jailed U.S. government subcontractor, adding that he was treated so poorly he doubted he could ever come back to the island as a friend.

Richardson, who previously vowed to remain in Cuba until he at least got to see jailed Maryland native Alan Gross, changed his mind after meetings with the Cuban government and other influential groups failed to yield any results. He said he would leave Wednesday.

"I have been here a week and tried through all means — with religious institutions, diplomats from other countries, all kinds of efforts — and I see that this isn't going to change," Richardson told reporters. "So why would I stay?"

It was a stunning reversal after word last week that the Democratic politician had been invited by Cuban authorities and was hoping to negotiate Gross' release.

Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations who had enjoyed warm relations with Cuba in the past, said he was disheartened and disillusioned by his treatment, and wondered aloud if President Raul Castro's government was aiming to deliberately scuttle better ties with Washington.

"I am very disappointed and surprised," Richardson said. "Perhaps the Cuban government has decided it does not want to improve relations. Perhaps that is the message it is sending."

Richardson spoke of his longtime affection for Cuba, its people and its culture, but said this trip has soured all that.

"Unfortunately after this negative experience, I don't know if I could return here as a friend," he said. "The next step is up to the Cuban government, but they have not treated me like a friend."

Richardson has been hunkered down at the capital's Nacional hotel since last Wednesday, waiting for a response to his demand to visit Gross in a military hospital where the 62-year-old is being held. But high hopes for the trip evaporated quickly after Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said he could not even meet with Gross, let alone take him home. Richardson's request to see Castro was also denied.

"The State Department is very disappointed because they did not let me see Alan Gross," Richardson said Tuesday.

Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said President Barack Obama's administration had been in touch with Richardson and regretted that his requests had been falling on deaf ears. Still, she said the trip wasn't a wasted effort.

"It certainly underscored the plight of Mr. Gross," she told reporters in Washington.

Richardson said Cuban officials did not even want to discuss Gross' case with him, or suggest how the standoff could be resolved.

"There were no demands. It was just an outright rejection of even a dialogue on what could be done," he said.

Richardson said he told the Cubans that if Gross were freed, it could be the impetus for renewed dialogue on a host of issues between the Cold War enemies.

Richardson said the response was clear: "'You will not take Alan Gross home. You cannot see him,'" officials told him. Cuba's rejection of even a visit with Gross appeared to signify a hardening of Havana's stance. Former President Jimmy Carter and other previous U.S. visitors had been allowed to see Gross.

It was not clear what went wrong this time around. Richardson has not said specifically what he was told by the Cubans that led him to believe they welcomed his visit, or who in the government had delivered the message. Word of the trip leaked to U.S. news media outlets in Washington just as Richardson arrived, perhaps leading to a perception in Havana that the American was seeking to pressure them into a decision.

The Cuban government had no reaction to Richardson's decision to abandon his visit.

Gross was sentenced to 15 years in jail for crimes against the state after he was caught illegally bringing communications equipment onto the island while on a USAID-funded democracy building program. Cuba says the programs aim to bring down the government; Gross contends he was only trying to help the island's tiny Jewish community get Internet access.

Efforts have grown in recent months to seek Gross' release on humanitarian grounds. Those who have visited him say he has lost 100 pounds (45 kilos) in jail, and his 27-year-old daughter and elderly mother both are battling cancer back in the United States.

The case has crippled attempts to improve relations between Washington and Havana, and the treatment of Richardson by Cuban officials is sure to be a fresh blow.

The drama surrounding Richardson will have a lasting effect on perceptions in Washington, said Joe Garcia, a Miami-based former Obama administration appointee who has long known Richardson and frequently worked on Cuba-related issues.

"For elements in the Cuban regime to try to embarrass one of the senior American leaders in foreign policy either leads one to think no one is in control, or those that are in control are trying to work against finding any positive solutions," Garcia said.

"Bill Richardson is one of the most experienced public figures in American foreign policy. ... This isn't some guy who just swam ashore and said, 'I'm here to get Gross.'"

The countries can't even seem to connect on relatively mundane issues, like twice-yearly talks on migration and less-regular discussions they are meant to have on mail service. The last time they met on either issue was in January, and a new round that had been expected in July never happened. No new dates for either talks have been announced.

Associated Press writers Anne-Marie Garcia in Havana, Laura Wides-Munoz in Miami and Bradley Klapper in Washington contributed to this report.

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