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Patrick Leahy: New era for Cuba relations

By: **Associated Press**

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A senator just back from Cuba says it will require “give and take on both sides” and “quiet negotiation” to secure the release of an American man imprisoned in Cuba.

Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont says that Alan Gross isn’t going to be released by the Cuban government because of pressure from the United States.

Leahy tells CNN’s “State of the Union” that it’s time to re-examine the overall U.S.-Cuban relationship and move on from the “Cold War mentality” of the 1960s and 1970s.

Leahy met last week with Gross and raised his case during a meeting that a congressional delegation had with Cuban President Raul Castro.

Gross, who’s from Maryland, is serving a 15-year-sentence for bringing communications equipment to the island illegally while on a USAID-funded democracy-building program.

Meanwhile, Castro announced Sunday that he will step down as Cuba’s president in 2018 following a final five-year term, for the first time putting a date on the end of the Castro era. He tapped rising star Miguel Diaz-Canel as his top lieutenant and first in the line of succession.

The 81-year-old Castro also said he hopes to establish two-term limits and age caps for political offices including the presidency - an astonishing prospect for a nation led by Castro or his older brother Fidel since the 1959 revolution.

The 52-year-old Diaz-Canel is now a heartbeat from the presidency and has risen higher than any other Cuban official who didn’t directly participate in the heady days of the revolution.

“This will be my last term,” Raul Castro said, his voice firm.

In his 35-minute speech, Castro hinted at other changes to the constitution, some so dramatic that they will have to be ratified by the Cuban people in a referendum. Still, he scotched any idea that the country would soon abandon socialism, saying he had not assumed the presidency in order to destroy Cuba’s system.

“I was not chosen to be president to restore capitalism to Cuba,” he said. “I was elected to defend, maintain and continue to perfect socialism, not destroy it.”

Castro fueled interest in Sunday’s legislative gathering after mentioning Friday his possible retirement and suggesting lightheartedly that he had plans to resign at some point.

It’s now clear that he was dead serious when he promised that Sunday’s speech would have fireworks, and would touch on his future in leadership.

Cuba is at a moment of “historic transcendence,” Castro told lawmakers in speaking of his decision to name Diaz-Canel to the No. 2 job, replacing the 81-year-old Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, who fought with the Castros in the Sierra Maestra.

Castro said that Diaz-Canel’s promotion “represents a definitive step in the configuration of the future leadership of the nation through the gradual and orderly transfer of key roles to new generations.”

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