

In a historic visit, Obama arrives in Cuba; aims to push acrimony into past

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Havana: Stepping into history, President Barack Obama opened an extraordinary visit to Cuba today, eager to push decades of acrimony deeper into the past and forge irreversible ties with America's former adversary. With this visit, Obama has also become the first US President in 88 years to visit Cuba.

Obama's whirlwind trip is a crowning moment in his and Cuban President Raul Castro's ambitious effort to restore normal relations between their countries. While deep differences persist, the economic and political relationship has changed rapidly in the 15 months since the leaders vowed a new beginning.

Air Force One touched down at Havana's airport this afternoon after a three-hour flight from Washington. The President was joined by wife Michelle Obama and daughters Malia and Sasha on the flight, with dozens of US lawmakers and business leaders arriving separately for the visit.

For more than 50 years, Cuba was an unimaginable destination for a US President, as well as most American citizens. The US severed diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 after Fidel Castro's revolution sparked fears of communism spreading to the Western Hemisphere.

Domestic politics in both countries contributed to the continued estrangement well after the Cold War ended. The last visit to Cuba by a US President came in 1928, when Calvin Coolidge arrived on the island in a battleship.

"This is an incredible thing," said Carlos Maza, a 48-year-old refrigerator repairman from Havana. He called it "a big step forward."

Obama's visit was highly anticipated in Cuba, where workers furiously cleaned up the streets in Old Havana and gave buildings a fresh coat of paint.

American flags were raised alongside the Cuban colours in parts of the capital, an improbable image for those who have lived through a half-century of bitterness between the two countries.

Many Cubans were staying home in order to avoid extensive closures of main boulevards. By early afternoon the Cuban government didn't appear to be calling out crowds of supporters to welcome Obama, as it has with other visiting dignitaries.

The city's seaside Malecon promenade was largely deserted this morning except for a few cars, joggers, fishermen and pelicans.

The president's schedule in Cuba is jam-packed, including official meetings with Raul Castro and an event with US and Cuban entrepreneurs. But much of Obama's visit was about appealing directly to the Cuban people and celebrating the island's vibrant culture.

- AP