

Powell offers rare praise of Castro

WASHINGTON (AP) - Four decades of icy distance from Cuba melted a bit last week as Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke in some praise of Fidel Castro.

"He's done some good things for his people," Powell said of Castro, who took over Cuba in a revolution in 1959 and has ruled the Caribbean country ever since.

In 1961, with hopes fading that Castro was a democratic reformer, the United States broke relations with Cuba, and has condemned it annually as a sponsor of terrorism.

"He is no longer the threat he was," Powell said in response to questioning at a House Appropriations subcommittee hearing by Rep. Jose E. Serrano, D-N.Y., who denounced U.S. diplomatic isolation of Cuba as senseless.

Successive Democratic and Republican administrations, including President Bush's, have sought to isolate Cuba economically and politically. Castro, however, has managed to hang on, for years with the financial support of the Soviet Union.

"That policy makes no sense," Serrano told Powell, who sat impassively in the witness chair.

"It is a country that has not done any harm to us," Serrano said. "Why China and why not Cuba?"

The United States has diplomatic relations with China and Vietnam, had relations with the Soviet Union and negotiated with North Korea, Serrano said.

Instead of trying to guide Cuba toward democracy and

a better economy, the United States refuses to deal with Castro, Serrano said. "It is bad for them and it is bad for us."

Under Castro, he said, Cuba exports physicians, not revolution.

He suggested that U.S. policy perhaps is guided by sentiments in Dade County, Fla., which is home to tens of thousands of Cuban emigres who are hotly opposed to Castro and his government.

Powell said that in China, Russia and Vietnam "you can see leaders who the world is changing."

But in Cuba, he said, Castro is a leader trapped in the past. "He hasn't changed his views in any way," Powell said.

On other international matters, Powell said:

-There was "a little bit of progress" in U.S. efforts to curb violence in the Middle East. The Bush administration was talking to governments in the region on various levels to try to promote order, he said.

-On China, which President Bush has threatened with force if it attacks Taiwan, Powell took a tempered approach. "We will meet any danger which comes our way," he said. At the same time, "We are not looking for an enemy. We don't need an enemy." He added: "We are trying to get back on a more stable relations with China."

-On narcotics, Powell said that high-profile Americans in show business and the corporate world who use drugs were keeping the illicit trade going more than ordinary street users.

Florida court turns down voucher appeal

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) - The Florida Supreme Court has refused to review a ruling upholding the state's school voucher law, ending part of the constitutional challenge to the measure.

Last spring, Circuit Judge Ralph Smith Jr. ruled the law violated the state constitution by allowing tax dollars to be spent on private schools. An appeals court overturned his ruling in October.

In a 4-1 order issued Tuesday, the state's high court said it would not review the appeals court's decision.

Smith will now deal with the other parts of the lawsuit, including the claim that the law violates the constitutional barrier between church and state.

The plaintiffs are the state teacher's union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Florida PTA, the League of Women Voters and a handful of families and educators.

Gov. Jeb Bush made vouchers a priority during his first year in office and signed a bill creating the voucher program in 1999.

"I regret ... that we must continue to spend time and money in litigation that would be better spent educating our children," he said in a statement. "Nonetheless, I look forward to returning to the trial court to prove once and for all that the (program) complies fully with the U.S. and Florida constitutions."

A lawyer for the plaintiffs said the high court's order won't deter his clients.

"I don't think anybody should take comfort in the notion ... that the Supreme Court finds vouchers constitutional," Ron Meyer said.

Under the law, schools given failing grades two years out of four must allow students to seek vouchers funded by tax dollars to pay for private school.

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Activist

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order against Gordon. The order took effect July 13, the day of Mitchell's alleged assault on Gordon.

Mitchell was arrested in Lansing March 18 after being a fugitive from justice for eight months. His supporters say Mitchell fled because he was afraid he might be killed if taken into police custody.

Since his arrest, a sheriff's deputy at the jail, who ordered the civil rights activist to sleep on a dirty floor next to a toilet, has beaten Mitchell. Another deputy ordered Mitchell to scrub the jail walls, which other prisoners are not required to do.

Citing this "harassment and unjustified use of force" by sheriff's deputies to punish Mitchell, the Southwest Michigan Coalition said that it will seek Mitchell's transfer to a jail in another county or that he be placed in the custody of the U.S. Marshal's Office. In the letter to Byam, the coalition said:

"Clearly he [Mitchell] is not safe in Calhoun County, and your officials cannot put aside their personal distaste for him and political axes to grind to even ensure his fair treatment in the jail, not to mention at his criminal trial. We put you on notice."