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22Mar97 CUBA: CUBA REJECTS U.S. PROTEST OVER DIPLOMATIC POUCH.

By **Lionel Martin**

HAVANA, March 22 (Reuters) - Cuba on Saturday rejected a U.S. State Department protest that it had opened a diplomatic pouch, while at the same time claiming the pouch carried subversive materials that violated Cuban laws.

The United States said on Friday it had lodged a formal protest with Cuba after Cuban officials interfered with several diplomatic pouches destined for the U.S. interests section in Havana.

State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns called the incident "a blatant violation of international diplomatic law".

In a statement issued on Saturday, Cuba claimed the diplomatic pouch arrived open at Havana's International Airport on Feb. 18 in a plane belonging to a foreign company, and that "this company officially informed the U.S. interests section of the open diplomatic pouch."

The United States and Cuba do not have full diplomatic relations but have interests sections in each other's capital which primarily handle consular matters.

The Cuban statement said the open pouch contained "many copies of the booklet 'Support for a Democratic Transition in Cuba' that offends our sovereignty and dignity and which evidently was going to be distributed by the U.S. interests Section as part of its policy of aggression against Cuba."

The document in question was issued by President Bill Clinton in January in compliance with the Helms-Burton law which he signed in March 1996. Cuban President Fidel Castro responded by declaring: "No Mr. Clinton, there won't be a transition from socialism to capitalism."

The Cuban note said "it is an axiom of diplomatic practice, included in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, that a diplomatic mission cannot commit illegal acts condemned by the law in the territory of a country in which it is accredited."

Last December the Cuban parliament passed a law declaring it illegal "to disseminate or aid the distribution, with the aim of favouring the application of the Helms-Burton bill, of information, publications, documents or propaganda materials of the government of the United States."

The statement said that on Feb. 21, the Cuba government informed the U.S. interests section in Havana "it would not permit entry into the country of such subversive materials."

The Helms-Burton law calls for an end to Cuba's revolutionary government and applies legal sanctions against foreign enterprises and governments doing business on property expropriated from U.S. interests.

Dozens of nations, including members of the European Union, Canada, Russia and Mexico, have expressed open opposition to the Helms-Burton law.

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