

October 24, 1999, SUNDAY, First Edition

**Ryan, Castro to talk?;**

**Visit with Cuba chief up in air on eve of trip**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-As Gov. Ryan prepared to depart for Cuba on Saturday, aides remained unclear whether his groundbreaking five-day trip would include a visit with President Fidel Castro.

A contingent of nearly 90 delegates and members of the media were scheduled to board a Havana-bound United Airlines jet at 10 a.m. Saturday at O'Hare Airport, arriving in the Cuban capital at 3:12 p.m., Chicago time.

For Ryan's aides, who have spent weeks arranging the trip, Friday was another day of "pulling our hair out" to fine-tune the governor's schedule and iron out lingering logistical issues on the first trip to Cuba by an American governor in 40 years.

Once he arrives in Havana, Ryan is expected to meet privately with the president of the Cuban parliament and lead Illinois' delegation later to a ballet at the Great Theater of Havana.

On Sunday, Ryan and his wife, Lura Lynn, plan to attend church services and participate on a walking tour of Old Havana with Cuban cultural authorities, Ryan spokesman Dave Urbanek said.

The schedule for the latter half of the trip remained fluid, including whether Ryan would get to spend time with Castro. Most observers, however, believe it is nearly certain the communist leader will open his Revolution Palace to Ryan to draw attention to Ryan's position in favor of dropping the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba.

"That is still something that's floating out in thin air," Urbanek said of a meeting with Castro. "It's not something we even know is definite at this point, and I doubt we'll know it's definite until Castro gives it the go-ahead."

Earlier in the week, Ryan said he wanted to meet with anti-Castro Cuban dissidents during his visit, but when and with whom were uncertain late Friday, Urbanek said.

"We're still working with the State Department on whether we'll even release the names. But any meetings will be closed to the press. It's a very touchy situation."

Ryan's taxpayer-funded trip, which has stirred anger in the Cuban-American community in Florida, has drawn high praise from Cuban officials eager to capitalize on his high-profile visit.

The trip "constitutes an important reflection of the growing rejection by different sectors of the United States toward the current hostile policy of blockading Cuba," Cuban Foreign Ministry spokesman Alejandro Gonzalez said in a Reuters news agency report from Havana.

Jose Basulto, president of the Miami-based, anti-Castro Brothers to the Rescue, angrily denounced Ryan's trip, scoffing at the governor's stated goal of bringing humanitarian aid to the Cuban people.

Basulto said there was no guarantee Ryan's shipment of up to $ 2 million in food, drugs, school supplies and other goods will wind up in the hands of the needy, instead of on government-owned store shelves, once Illinois' delegation leaves Cuba.

"This is a way of legitimizing a regime that's been there through nine presidents of the United States without an election -- ever," said Basulto, whose organization lost two planes shot down by Cuba in 1996 while scouring the Straits of Florida for Cuban refugees.

Ryan's position in favor of lifting the embargo puts him squarely opposite GOP presidential candidate George W. Bush, who this month said sanctions should remain until freedom of speech, religion and the press come to Cuba.

"Gov. Bush realizes that good people disagree on issues sometimes, and he and Gov. Ryan agree on most major issues," Bush spokesman Scott McClellan said.

Ryan, who is chairing Bush's Illinois presidential campaign, gently criticized Bush's position on the embargo as out of step.

"How long do they want to wait? Forty years? Everybody's got an opinion on it," Ryan said. "Maybe mine will change when I get back. I don't know."