

# *France Welcomes Cuban Leader for First Time in Two Decades*

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Paris, February 1 (RHC-teleSUR) -- The relationship between Cuba and France has entered into a new era, a French envoy said Sunday, as Cuban President Raul Castro began an historic visit to the European country.

The visit marks the first time a Cuban president has been to France since Fidel Castro in 1995, and follows a trip by French President Francois Hollande to Cuba in May 2015.

“(The relationship) is the best that has existed, an excellent level of relation that is expressed in a reciprocated confidence, in deep respect,” Jean-Pierre Bel, personal envoy of Hollande, told Prensa Latina.

Raul arrived Saturday and has since been received at the Arc de Triomphe. His official agenda begins Monday when he meets with Hollande and French prime minister, Manuel Valls. The two leaders are to have dinner at the Elysee palace Monday night.

Hollande’s visit eight months ago paved the way for a strengthening of ties between the countries, when his country announced a deal forgiving US\$8.5 billion of overdue interest payments to the Paris Club in exchange for Cuba’s commitment to pay back US\$2.6 billion of the original debt within eighteen months. The agreement cleared the way for Cuba to access international credit.

“The visit of President Raul Castro to Paris will consecrate all the steps of advancement that we have achieved together,” Bel added.

He reiterated that France had always opposed the blockade against Cuba in the European Union, adding that there was already cooperation in education, culture and business.

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