

## Cubans look to US detente for better Web access

January 27 2015, by Laurent Thomet

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People queue at an Internet service provider in Havana, on January 20, 2015

Alfredo Castellano travels half an hour to Havana twice a week to write emails in a computer center with a Fidel Castro poster outside and aging machines inside.

Like most Cubans, he lacks Internet access at home, but many hope this

will change after the United States offered to bolster the communist island's tightly-controlled telecommunications as part of a historic diplomatic detente.

"I'm very excited because it would mean lots of changes. What we don't know is how long this will take," said Castellano, 28, after sending birthday wishes to a friend in Winnipeg, Canada.

Wearing a baseball cap and sleeveless shirt, the aspiring tour guide sat in front of a screen in a stuffy room in Old Havana with a dozen computers that only offer [email service](#).

Other locations offer Internet connection but it costs \$4.50 per hour, three times more expensive than the email-only stations in a country where people earn around \$20 per month.

"Technology here is a little behind," said Castellano, who did not have Internet when he studied computer science 10 years ago and comes to Havana because service is too slow in his Havana suburb.

"People are very frustrated. There are a lot of things we don't know because we lack Internet."

### **Cuba invites US firms**

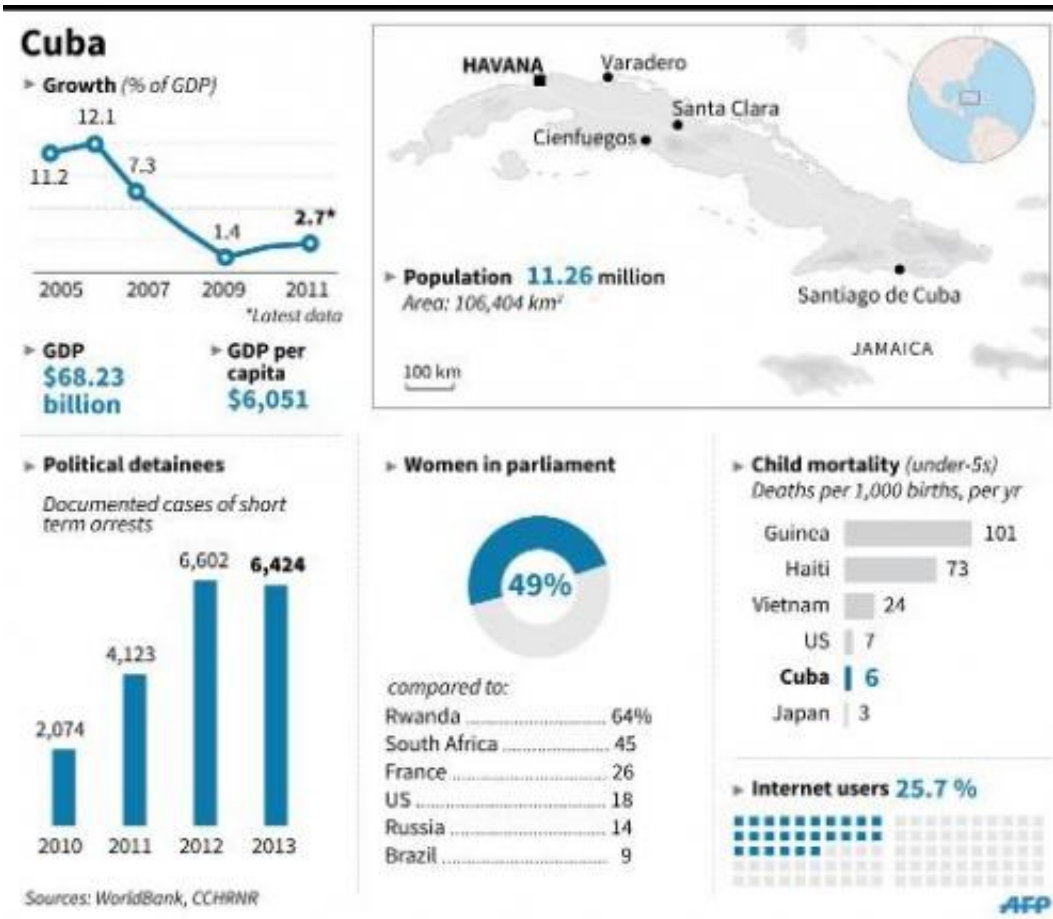
Cubans are starved for information in a country where only 3.4 percent have Internet service at home, which arrives via a fiber-optic cable from Venezuela, according to the International Telecommunications Union.

But crafty Cubans have found ways to skirt the prohibitive prices and restrictions.

They stand outside hotels with smartphones to sneak into their Wi-Fi

network.

Others sell hours of films, television shows and computer games that buyers download into memory sticks for as little as \$0.20 for four gigabytes of entertainment.



Socio-economic factfile on Cuba

Young computer whizzes have built their own intranet network by installing Wi-Fi routers across Havana to share movies and play video games together online.

This month, the US government eased trade restrictions to allow firms to export telecommunications technology to Cuba following the rapprochement announced by US President Barack Obama and Cuban leader Raul Castro.

But Castellano's question—when will US tech companies arrive—is something US and Cuban officials were unable to answer after historic talks last week aimed at normalizing relations.

Cuba's chief negotiator Josefina Vidal indicated that her country is "willing to receive US telecommunications companies" to explore business opportunities.

But US Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson said Vidal was short on specifics and that experts from both countries would hold further talks.

"Access and the ability for the Cuban people to get information is really critically important," Jacobson said in Havana on Friday.

Analysts say foreign firms eyeing Cuba face many challenges.

Authorities may be reluctant to allow too much access to information, the state [telecommunications](#) company ETECSA may resist opening its monopoly and the government may simply not have enough cash.

"If Cuba really wants to move forward and ETECSA doesn't want to block it, they still have the problem that they don't have much money," California State University computer science professor Larry Press told AFP.



A Cuban uses an illegal Wi-Fi connection to surf the internet, on November 28, 2014, in Havana

Cuba, Press said, should improve access right now but also start preparing for the next generation technology that will inevitably appear in five years.

### **Cubans want to connect**

After visiting Cuba in June, Google chairman Eric Schmidt said the country's Internet was "trapped in the 1990s," and the US embargo would make it "much harder" to displace the island's Asian-built infrastructure.

The authorities tightly control access, which is mainly available to

companies, universities and government institutions. Few individuals are authorized to have expensive home connections. Some dissident blogs are blocked.

The government slightly increased access in June 2013 when the state telecom firm Etecsa opened around 100 Internet "navigation" rooms, but people would prefer to connect at home.

"It limits my business," said Belkis Basail, 45, who runs a bed and breakfast she opened under 2011 reforms allowing small private entrepreneurship.

She wants Internet for her clients and to create a webpage to advertise her rooms abroad.

Standing in line to get email service installed on her phone, she said the rapprochement with the United States would be good for Cubans.

"It's better to have friends than enemies," she said.

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