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Cuba, U.S. agree to restore direct postal service

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Cuba and the United States have agreed to restore direct postal service after a half-century rupture in one of the first bilateral deals since the former Cold War foes re-established diplomatic ties in July.

The announcement on Friday comes ahead of the first anniversary of the Dec. 17 announcement by U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro that they would seek to normalize relations.

"Both parties agreed to re-establish direct postal service between the two countries through the implementation of a pilot program that will begin in the coming weeks, with permanent service foreseen in the future," Cuba's foreign ministry said in a statement.

Direct mail talks had been underway even before detente, one of a number of areas of bilateral cooperation including drug interdiction, immigration and environmental protection.

Those matters were put on hold as the two sides worked on restoring diplomatic relations and opening embassies, which they achieved in July. Since then they have re-engaged on a variety of issues.

Most commercial ties remain severed, however, as a result of the U.S. economic embargo. Obama has asked Congress to lift the embargo but the Republican majority has resisted.

Direct mail service between the United States and Cuba has been suspended since 1963. Despite the ban, letters and other mail still flowed between the United States and the island nation 90 miles (144.84 km) away through other countries, such as Canada, Mexico and Panama.