

CUBAN DISSIDENTS HONOR OAS SECRETARY-GENERAL DENIED ENTRY

HAVANA: A group of Cuban dissidents on Wednesday recognized the secretary-general of the Organization of American States for defending human rights in their country even though the government denied him entry to attend the ceremony. About a dozen dissidents and diplomats from the US, Czech Republic and Sweden honored Luis Almagro at the home of the late democracy activist Oswaldo Paya, who died in a 2012 car accident. Paya's daughter Rosa Maria

invited Almagro to receive the prize from her group in Havana. She has accused the Cuban government of causing the wreck, a charge the government denies.

Almagro sent dissidents a letter saying that the OAS's only interest is to help move Cuba closer to the values and principles upheld by the organization in relation to democracy and human rights. He also said his intention is not to evaluate Cuba's internal politics. In his letter, Almagro said the

Cuban government told him it was astonished he was involved in what it called "anti-Cuban" activities. He also said he hoped the government would not retaliate against the group.

The communist-run government also denied entry to former Mexican President Felipe Calderon and former Chilean Education Minister Maria Aylwin, both of whom were invited to attend the ceremony. On Wednesday, the Cuban government released a

statement saying Paya intended "to launch a grave, open provocation against the Cuban government, generate internal instability, hurt the image of the country and, at the same time, damage the progress of diplomatic relations between Cuba and other countries." Cuba has not belonged to the OAS since 1962. It considers the organization an instrument the US government uses to pressure countries that do not follow its policies.—AP

ECUADOR TO HOLD RUN-OFF IN TENSE PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

QUITO: Ecuador will hold a run-off presidential election in April after a hard fought and inconclusive first round, the electoral commission said Wednesday. The voting is being watched closely to see if oil-producing Ecuador will become the latest leftist-run country in Latin America to shift to the right. It could also determine the immediate fate of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been holed up in Ecuador's embassy in London since 2012 to avoid going to Sweden to face rape charges.

In voting on Sunday, ruling party leftist candidate Lenin Moreno finished first but fell short of the margin needed to avoid a run-off. He will face a run-off on April 2 against his conservative rival Guillermo Lasso. With 99.5 percent of the votes counted, Moreno, a former vice president under President Rafael Correa, garnered 39.3 percent of the votes, against 28.1 percent for Lasso, a former banker, the National Electoral Council said.

Under Ecuadoran law, in the first round the winner needs at least 40 percent of the votes and a margin of victory of at least 10 percentage points to avoid a run-off. Opinion polls and analysts suggest Moreno faces a tough challenge in the second round since conservative voters from other parties are likely to rally behind Lasso. "Any party could beat the governing one in the second round because there is major resistance to and rejection of the government," said political scientist Paolo Moncagatta of Quito's San Francisco University before Sunday's vote.

Correa however remained defiant that his side could win and extend leftist rule after his decade in power. "Everything indicates that we will win in the second round," he said. Lasso alleged fraud in the vote count, but the electoral council denied the accusation. His supporters rallied in protest at the delay in publishing full results outside the council's headquarters, where scuffles broke out with police on Monday. Lasso has vowed to cut spending and taxes, shifting away from the current government's tax-and-spend policies.

He has also said he will move to end Assange's asylum in Ecuador's embassy in London. That protection has shielded Assange from arrest for possible extradition to the United States for leaking diplomatic cables that embarrassed Washington. Correa on Wednesday denounced the idea of ejecting Assange as a breach of his rights. Moreno has said he will allow Assange to stay in the embassy. The election is a test of the legacy of Correa, an outspoken critic of the United States. A victory for Lasso would mean a fresh setback for the left in Latin America, after similar swings to the right in Argentina, Brazil and Peru.—AFP



WASHINGTON: Activists and protesters with the National Center for Transgender Equality rally in front of the White House, in Washington. —AP

CONSERVATIVES HAIL END OF TRANSGENDER BATHROOM RULE

TRANSGENDER RIGHTS ADVOCATES VOW TO OVERCOME SETBACK

WASHINGTON: Conservatives are praising the Trump administration's rollback of public school bathroom requirements for transgender students, saying the move corrects a legal overreach by the Obama administration that is best left for states to decide. Transgender rights advocates, meanwhile, are vowing to overcome a major setback. "We're not discouraged. And we're going to keep fighting like we have been and keep fighting for the right thing," said Gavin Grimm, a transgender teen who sued his Virginia high school over its bathroom access policy and whose case is set to be heard by the Supreme Court next month.

The Justice and Education departments said Wednesday that public schools no longer need to abide by the Obama-era directive instructing them to allow transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms of their chosen gender. That guidance, issued in May, led to a spate of lawsuits over how it should be applied, according to a letter from the departments being sent to schools nationwide. The agencies said they withdrew the guidance to "in order to further and more completely consider the legal issues involved." Anti-bullying safeguards for students will not be affected by the change, according to the letter.

But advocates of protections for transgender teens said the overall rollback sends "a message that something is wrong with them,

which is harmful," said Nancy Haque, co-executive director of Basic Rights Oregon. Grimm's case also could be in jeopardy with the guidance now lifted. The high court could decide not to hear it and direct lower courts to settle that issue instead. There won't be any immediate impact on schools, because the Obama guidance had been temporarily blocked since August by a federal judge in Texas, one of 13 states that sued over the directive. And schools remain free to provide the same treatment to students even without guidance.

No daylight

The earlier guidance was based on the Obama administration's determination that federal sex discrimination law known as Title IX, applies to gender identity. It will now be up to states and school districts to decide the issue of bathroom access. The Obama guidance did not sufficiently explain its interpretation of that law, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement. "Congress, state legislatures and local governments are in a position to adopt appropriate policies or laws addressing this issue," Sessions said, adding that the department is still committed to protecting students from bullying.

"This is an issue best solved at the state and local level," Education Secretary Betsy DeVos added. "Schools, communities and families can find - and in many cases have

found - solutions that protect all students." Earlier Wednesday, White House spokesman Sean Spicer denied media reports that DeVos, who has been criticized for her stance on LGBT issues, had opposed the change but was overruled by Sessions. Spicer said any disagreement was merely over wording and timing. "There is no daylight between anybody," Spicer said, adding that DeVos was "100 percent" on board with the decision.

Conservative activists who saw it as the Obama administration meddling in local matters praised the change. Wisconsin state Rep. Jesse Kremer said he was pleased by the change but still intends to re-introduce a bill to force public school students to use bathrooms that correspond with their birth gender. "No longer will federal officials distort federal law that is meant to equalize educational opportunities for women, and no longer will they force local officials to intermingle boys and girls within private areas like locker rooms, showers, hotel rooms on school trips and restrooms," said Gary McCaleb, senior counsel for the conservative legal group Alliance Defending Freedom. However, the reversal is a setback for transgender rights groups, which had been urging Trump to keep the guidelines in place. Advocates say federal law will still prohibit discrimination against students based on their gender or sexual orientation.—AP