

U.S. Prisoner Gets Hanukkah Visit From Jewish Leaders

Alan Gross, the Maryland man who was jailed for trying to give Jewish Cubans Internet access, received a visit on the last day of Hanukkah.

BY PETER ORSI Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuban Jewish leaders said Friday that they celebrated Hanukkah with imprisoned U.S. government subcontractor Alan Gross this week, two days after he marked four years in custody.

A statement from Beth Shalom Temple said community president Adela Dworin and vice president David Prinstein met with the Maryland man for two hours on Thursday, the last day of Hanukkah, as they have done on other Jewish holidays.

Gross and his visitors lit candles, prayed and had foods associated with the holiday including latkes and chocolate coins. They also discussed a letter he sent this week urging President Barack Obama to personally work for his release and saying he fears his country has abandoned him.

“During the encounter we could see that he was in better spirits, more physically recovered,” the temple’s statement said.

Gross, 64, says he has lost about 100 pounds in detention, suffers from arthritis and is allowed to leave the small cell he shares with two other inmates for just one hour a day. He said in his letter that but for occasional visitors and phone calls, he feels “completely isolated from the outside world.”

Gross was detained Dec. 3, 2009, after he was caught importing and installing restricted communications equipment under a program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. Such programs aim to promote democracy in the Communist-run country, and Cuba considers them an affront to its sovereignty.

Gross testified at his two-day trial that he was no threat to Cuba and was only trying to improve the Jewish community’s Internet access. He was convicted of crimes against the state and sentenced to 15 years. Gross’ imprisonment has been a major sticking point between longtime Cold War foes Washington and Havana. Cuba says it wants to negotiate the fate of both Gross and four of its intelligence agents serving long prison sentences in the United States.

The U.S. State Department called on Cuba this week to free Gross “immediately and unconditionally.”