U.S. Erases Rights Issue With Cuba

By DON BOHNING

The Carter Administration has quietly removed human rights as a major issue in normalizing relations with Cuba.

"There has been sufficient movement in the right direction," a U.S. official acknowledged Friday.

Cuba's actions in "repatriating American citizens, freeing political prisoners and improving conditions under which prisoners are held" as examples of movement in the right direction.

The same official noted, however, that "there is still a long way to go" and human rights "remains a concern," if no longer an "unmountable one" in Washington's relationship with Havana.

For years the Carter Administration and those preceding it had listed three major stumbling blocks to normalizing relations with the government of Fidel Castro. They were:

- An improvement in Cuba's human rights situation.
- A reduction in Cuba's military presence in Africa.
- Agreement on compensation for U.S. property expropriated by the Castro government after it seized power in 1959.

The first public indication that human rights was no longer a disturbing issue was the White House report to Congress last which week on U.S. policy toward Cuba.

"We will continue to indicate to the Cubans that we cannot consider a total lifting of the U.S. embargo on direct trade until there is some dramatic improvement in their African posture and (2) we reach an agreement on a formula for payment of compensation for expropriated U.S. properties," the report says.

"We should also continue to make it clear to them that we cannot consider re-establishing diplomatic relations until these major problems are resolved," the report concludes.

It makes no mention of human rights as a consideration in normalizing relations.

As recently as last July, however, human rights ranked as a major issue in U.S.-Cuba relations. Since then Castro has announced the release of more than 2,000 political prisoners, and the U.S. has been reuniting Cuban families.

In its report to Congress, the Carter Administration defends itself for having made toward more normal relationship with Cuba, including the exchange of small diplomatic missions.