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## **Cuba Seeks Admission to EU Aid**

*by LADB Staff*

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In an apparent policy reversal, President Fidel Castro announced last December that Cuba would ask for inclusion in the Cotonou Agreement between the European Union (EU) and the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group. ACP members are eligible to receive a share in the US\$12.7 billion in EU aid and trade advantages over the next five years that resulted from the agreement negotiated in 2000 in Cotonou, Benin Republic (see CubaSource, 2000-10-20).

Cuba's interest in entering the Cotonou Agreement was signaled last September when three Cuban ministers held talks in Brussels with EU Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy and other key EU officials. The EU Council of Ministers decided in November to allow Cuba to take part as an "informal observer" in the current negotiations with the ACP. It is now unofficially understood that Cuba is a permanent observer in those negotiations despite its exclusion from any benefits resulting from them. Though an ACP member since December 2000, Cuba has not been included in the Cotonou benefits because it withdrew from the negotiations in 2000 to protest the EU's increased willingness to cooperate with US Cuba policy.

In July 2002, Lamy said Cuba could not receive Cotonou benefits unless it acceded to the Common Position a set of EU rules on democracy and human rights first proposed by Spain's Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar in December 1996. At the time and later, Aznar maintained a strong anti-Castro stance. Cuba says the rules are not applied equally to all 77 ACP member states and are a capitulation to US dictates (see NotiCen, 2002-08-08). The Common Position could be regarded as a watered down version of US sanctions against Cuba because its adoption came after passage in the US of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act and the subsequent US campaign to enlist EU support for it.

The Common Position's key clause states, "The objective of the European Union in its relations with Cuba is to encourage a process of transition to a pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as a sustainable recovery and improvement in the living standards of the Cuban people." Helms-Burton requires, among other things, that the US government provide assistance "to facilitate a peaceful transition to representative democracy and a market economy in Cuba." Like Helms-Burton, the Common Position permits the flow of humanitarian aid to Cuba only through nongovernmental organizations on the assumption that the Castro government would divert all direct aid to its own uses.

The US and EU positions differ in spirit mainly in that the EU repudiates the aggressive tactics employed by the US against Cuba. Therefore, the Common Position contains the disclaimer, "It is not European Union policy to try to bring about change by coercive measures with the effect of increasing the economic hardship of the Cuban people."

### *EU policy under attack*

The Common Position has come under considerable criticism in Europe, in part because it was adopted without the customary process of achieving prior consensus among member states and because of simmering dissatisfaction with tactics. More than one dissenter has pointed out that the Common Position was not commonly held among member states, not even Spain, which has extensive business, cultural, and other contacts with Cuba. EU nations account for 56% of all foreign investment in Cuba, according to official Cuban figures.

Representatives of organizations from eight EU states wrote to the president of the European Commission and other top EU officials last year complaining that EU's "consistently restrictive interpretation" of the Common Position had resulted in an ineffective policy of imposing conditions on Cuba. They also argued that the EU had never acted upon the series of UN resolutions condemning the US embargo. "In order for this to happen, the 'Common Position'...must be recognized as an unacceptable stumbling block. If we observe the bilateral relations of the individual member states, we can say that the EU policy on Cuba is neither 'common' nor a 'position,' and we therefore call for its abolition," read the letter.

In its place, the organizations want a Cuba policy independent of the US. Miguel Angel Martinez, a Spanish EU deputy, said while visiting Havana last December that many EU governments that went along with the position in 1996 were now having a hard time disassociating themselves from it once they realized it has been a failure. "The progress of the negotiations between the island and the EU is reflected in the fact that no ambassador from that bloc in Havana has defended the common position," Martinez said.

During a December meeting of Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) members in Havana, Castro announced that Cuba would reapply for participation in the Cotonou Agreement benefits. Castro said that since Cuba withdrew its previous request some of the EU's "humiliating conditions" had softened. The World Data Service cited unconfirmed reports that Aznar's government had expressed a willingness to drop its uncompromising stance and support Cuban entry. Some analysts said Aznar wants to cement Spain's commercial ties to Cuba before US firms swarm into Cuba once the embargo is lifted.

A report from the Spanish News Service said Cuba was now "willing to sign" and accept EU conditions, but the report did not cite any sources. When the EU Council of Foreign Ministers agreed in December to leave the door open for Cuban entry, they made no public announcement of substantive changes in the Common Position.

In the resolution, the ministers simply reminded Cuba that they were waiting for changes that would satisfy their demands for political freedom, at the same time "recognizing some positive signs in the field of greater religious freedom, the nonapplication of death penalty for three years, and more economic opportunities for individuals." Despite the EU's formal posture on the matter, the Cuban government maintains that many, if not all, EU members favor Cuba's entry without the conditions of the Common Position. The government also takes as a positive sign the establishment of a European Commission office in Havana planned for later this year.

Yet, Cuban officials have not said that the EU has relaxed any of the Common Position demands. Interior Minister Ricardo Cabrisas said in December that Cuba's admission to the Cotonou Agreement would not "imply additional conditions beyond those already established." Cuba has Caribbean backing Caribbean members of the ACP long ago deviated from both the US and EU policy of isolating Cuba from its neighbors. At a summit in Havana celebrating the 30th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad-Tobago, the delegates signed a final declaration reiterating CARICOM opposition to the embargo and the EU's exclusionary policy.

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