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EU Announces Sanctions Against Cuba

by LADB Staff

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The US has continued efforts to internationalize its quarrels with Cuba regarding the Cuban crackdown in March and April against US-funded dissidents and the execution of three ferry hijackers (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24). The European Union (EU) responded with a set of diplomatic sanctions, but the US was less successful in enlisting the Organization of American States (OAS), which ignored Secretary of State Colin Powell's request for action against Cuba. The EU has taken several steps against Cuba since the crackdown. In addition to sending protest notes, the EU suspended consideration of Cuba's application for inclusion in the Cotonou Agreement, which awards benefits through the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group, of which Cuba is a member.

The EU Commission announced in late April that it was shelving the application because of what it called "a very grave and very serious political deterioration about which the European Commission cannot remain silent." The EU's insistence on linking Cotonou benefits to the human rights issue has been a constant source of irritation in Cuba, which has always refused to accept what it calls selective application of arbitrary norms (see NotiCen, 2002- 08-08).

The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry (MINREX) said in a May 20 statement that Cuba would withdraw its application, leaving the EU Commission with nothing to review. MINREX said the EU was using as a "pretext" the "just sentences imposed by Cuban courts on mercenaries who collaborated with the United States government and the hijackers of the ferry Baragua." No EU country has imposed anything like the US embargo on Cuba, but some aid programs have been suspended. Italy cut off US\$47.5 million in aid for agriculture, urban rehabilitation, social services, and other programs.

EU reduces diplomatic & cultural contacts

The EU has been tentative in applying noneconomic sanctions. Just as the US government has been uncertain about what to do with Cuba (see NotiCen, 2003-05-03), there is some uncertainty within the EU. Assistant Foreign Minister Annemie Neyts recommended in mid-April that the EU cease all diplomatic contacts, but Foreign Minister Louis Michel said there was no reason for breaking off the dialogue with Cuba. The EU's newly opened office in Havana has not been closed. The compromise position appears in a statement issued June 5 by the EU Council of Ministers announcing selected sanctions. Among the sanctions is a limit on visits to Cuba by high-level officials and a reduction of EU participation in cultural events in Cuba.

The statement also said that EU member embassies will invite Cuban dissidents to attend celebrations of their national holidays. The statement also registered displeasure with the jailing of dissident journalists, whom it calls "political prisoners," and said they were deprived of "their freedom for having expressed freely their opinion." Relying apparently on reports from relatives

and friends of the jailed dissidents, the EU called attention to "poor detention conditions of prisoners," but offered no independent evidence. The ministers also complained that Cuba had broken its self-imposed moratorium on the death penalty.

A MINREX analysis said the EU was motivated to take these steps to show "contrition and repentance" for refusing support for the US war against Iraq. Cuba refutes EU statement Responding to the EU, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said, "It's too much." In a MINREX statement, he accused the EU of "kowtowing" to the US." As for the diplomatic snubs, the MINREX statement pointed out that no head of state from the EU and only two EU foreign ministers had visited Cuba in five years. This compares with the 24 heads of state and 17 foreign ministers from other countries who went to Cuba in 2002 alone.

On the death penalty, MINREX accused the EU of hypocrisy because it had not complained about the 71 executions in the US in 2002 and had never proposed a condemnation of the US in the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) for applying the death penalty against minors or the mentally ill. On the alleged mistreatment of prisoners, MINREX said the EU has said nothing about the treatment of prisoners held at the US Naval Base at Guantanamo. On reduction of cultural events, MINREX said the Spanish Cultural Center in Havana, by Spain's own admission, had engaged in noncultural activities in violation of the 1996 agreement that set it up.

Cuba announced June 13 it would cancel the bilateral agreement and take over the cultural center. MINREX said that inviting dissidents to national celebrations at EU embassies would make EU ambassadors in Havana underlings of the US Interests Section. Only Spain has done that so far, said the statement. Sweden immediately invited dissidents to its June 7 celebration, and no Cuban officials attended. MINREX warned the embassies that they would be in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations by allowing Cuban "mercenaries" to use their embassies as centers of conspiracy against the Cuban government. The statement also made clear that the government would take action against cooperating dissidents.

Finally, MINREX said Cuba did not "recognize the European Union's moral authority to condemn it," much less to issue ultimatums. Impact of sanctions is limited The practical impact of the EU's sanctions is nil since they are mostly symbolic. What is more noteworthy is the justification for them, which has infuriated Cuban leaders. The Council of Ministers' understanding was that the crackdown was aimed at "violating fundamental freedoms in Cuba." Cuba, said the statement, deprived civilians of "the ultimate human right, that of life," referring to the execution of the three hijackers. The ministers did not mention that the dissidents were not convicted for their opinions but for violating laws against conspiring with the US. Nor did they mention that considerable evidence, especially from government infiltrators of the dissident organizations who testified to the recruitment, direction, and payment of the accused by the US government.

Castro focuses on Aznar

The Cuban government has focused its wrath mostly on the two most conservative governments in the EU, Spain and Italy. Castro and his brother Raul led separate marches on the Spanish and Italian embassies on June 12. In a televised speech, Castro called Spain's President Jose Maria Aznar

"a little Fuhrer with a mustache and Nazi- fascist ideology." He called Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi "a clown." Even without the crackdown, the EU has maintained a prickly relationship with Cuba based on its Common Position, a Cuba policy vaguely mirroring US policy. The EU now promises to re-examine it. This is nothing new since the EU re-examines it every six months anyway.

The policy, first proposed by Aznar in 1996, links admission to Cotonou and earlier agreements with the ACP to human rights considerations and closely follows key wording in the 1996 Helms-Burton Act (see NotiCen, 2003-02-06). Aznar's expressed goal was to apply economic penalties against Cuba and to support Cuban dissidents. MINREX, quoting a Spanish press report from 1996, said Aznar was attempting to reproduce the US-sanctions policy in the EU. MINREX said Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstat, acting as special envoy on Cuba, promoted the proposal. President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) had sent Eizenstat to Europe in 1996 to lobby for support of Helms-Burton in Europe (see NotiSur, 1996-11-01).

In 1998, the US won EU cooperation in support of a Helms-Burton provision threatening current use in Cuba of expropriated properties (see EcoCentral, 1998-06-04). Attempts to internationalize US policy have taken on new vigor because President George W. Bush's administration seems to sense that the harsh penalties handed out to dissidents and hijackers were a public relations blunder for Cuba, diverting attention from the US role in fomenting the March-April crisis toward the simpler issues of jailed journalists and the death penalty.

Powell pressures OAS

The strategy has been more successful in the EU than in Latin America, however. Last month, the OAS Permanent Council responded to pressure from Powell to pass a resolution condemning Cuba by approving a weak, nonbinding statement that failed to get a majority vote. Powell tried again at the June 9-10 General Assembly of the OAS meeting in Santiago de Chile. He asked his fellow foreign ministers "to hasten the inevitable democratic transition in Cuba." His remarks were not really about democracy but about Cuba's jailed dissidents who, he said, were only trying to exercise their "basic human rights." Like his EU counterparts, Powell did not mention that they were essentially working for the US. Powell misread the OAS's mood. The theme of this year's meeting was Democratic Governability in the Americas, not whether Cuba had used harsh methods to clamp down on dissent. In the final statement of the meeting, the delegates ignored Powell's request and issued a document that did not mention Cuba or the traditional sanctions strategy of the US for producing democracy.

In their Santiago Statement, the OAS ministers took a more sophisticated view of the dynamics of democracy, noting that the greatest threat to democracy in the hemisphere was poverty. They called for a global economy friendlier to the region's exports and for more investment in the region's economies. In another defeat for the US, the OAS declined to elect a US representative to its Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The US candidate was a political appointee, Rafael E. Martinez, who served candidate George W. Bush as a Republican fundraiser in Florida in 2000. He is the brother of Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Mel Martinez. This was the first time in the commission's 44-year history that the US has not been represented.

The New York Times reported that some representatives at the meeting complained that Powell had focused too narrowly on Cuba, ignoring the main agenda item. The Times quoted a senior OAS official who said the delegates were willing to talk about Cuba, "but in a balanced way, and not only about human rights." The official said, "Many states...want to talk about the isolation of Cuba, the embargo, and all of that."

No EU economic sanctions

It is doubtful that EU criticism of Cuba will result in serious alterations in economic or diplomatic ties. Unlike the US, which has no investments and no bilateral trade with Cuba, the EU has considerable economic interests there. Spain is Europe's most intractable critic of Cuba, but is also the leading investing nation. At the height of Spain's animosity toward Cuba in the mid-1990s, Spanish investment remained largely unaffected. The EU has so far not followed the Italian lead in cutting aid nor moved toward an economic blockade of Cuba. A week before the EU Council of Ministers released its statement, a group of investors from the nongovernmental organization UK-Cuba Initiative were in Cuba talking about investing in several sectors of the Cuban economy including biotechnology, information systems, tourism, oil, and agribusiness.

Lord Colin Berkeley, a member of the House of Lords and co-president of the organization, said in Havana that he believed in dialogue and collaboration and that isolating Cuba was not the road to take.

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