

10-20-2000

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LADB Staff

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuba Seeks Membership ACP; Rejects European Trade Preference." (2000). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8765>

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Cuba Seeks Membership ACP; Rejects European Trade Preference

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2000-10-20

The Cuban government has resumed its pursuit of membership in the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific Group (ACP) after withdrawing its application in April because of disagreements with the Cuba policy of the European Union (EU). In August, Cuba announced it was still interested in joining the ACP, but on its own terms. Membership in the ACP, an organization of former European colonies, is currently of more interest to Cuba than the trade links the group has with the EU.

During a visit to Havana by the ACP's Council of Ministers Aug. 3, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said Cuba would like full membership in the organization but did not want to take part in commercial agreements with the EU. Cuba is not an ACP member but has had observer status since 1998.

During the last year or so, Cuba appeared ready for full membership and had broad support within the EU and the ACP. Cuba made formal application for membership in February (see NotiCen, 2000-02-17). The chief reason for the ACP's existence is to take advantage of special trade and aid arrangements with the EU under a series of conventions, the most recent of which was signed in Cotonou, Benin Republic, in June.

In April, Cuba canceled its application for admission to the ACP in retaliation for EU votes to censure Cuba for human rights abuses. Perez also said Cuba would not join because of the EU's "unacceptable demands" (see CubaSource, 2000-05-10).

In a letter to the foreign ministers of the ACP countries in April, Roque said Cuba was withdrawing its application for membership because "we have seen arrogance, smugness, and the tendency on the part of various European countries to impose conditions on Cuba.

Such spirits are evident in the unanimous way in which the European Union countries supported the United States' conspiracy against Cuba at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva."

Because Cuba pulled out of membership talks before the Cotonou Agreement was signed, it is ineligible to take advantage of the preferential access to the EU market and various assistance programs offered under the agreement. But those advantages are offset by requirements in the agreement to adhere to EU standards on human rights and governance.

Cuba has always maintained that it would not accept dictates from the EU on domestic issues. Since April, various EU members encouraged Cuba to reconsider. Manuel Marin, vice president of the European Commission, said EU "fervently desired" that Cuba take part in the new Cotonou Agreement. In May, German Minister of Cooperation and Development Heidemarie Wieczorek-

Zeul said in Havana that Germany had been trying to persuade Cuba to join the Cotonou Agreement.

While in Cuba, Wieczorek-Zeul signed an agreement with Cuban officials for a German-financed US\$1.5 million environmental project to counter desertification and soil erosion in eastern Cuba.

Foreign Minister says this is not reversal of policy

In early August, Perez said Cuba was again interested in obtaining full membership in ACP and insisted it was not a reversal of the April announcement withdrawing its application. Cuba presumably would enter the organization without coming under the Cotonou Agreement. "I am confident that, in a relatively short time, Cuba will become a full member of ACP," he said.

Perez emphasized the ACP side of the EU relationship, saying Cuba was determined to broaden its relations with the member countries. The announcement came during the visit by the president of the ACP's Council of Ministers, Anicet Georges Dologuele of the Central African Republic. He accepted Cuba's terms for limited participation and said the organization's rules should be changed so that Cuba could become a member without signing the EU-ACP agreements.

While awaiting full membership, Cuba would retain its observer status. He said Cuba could receive benefits through its association with other ACP members. Perez was optimistic that the attitude of some countries in the EU toward Cuba was improving. "We think the current situation could be overcome at any time," he said. [Sources: Reuters, 05/11/00, 05/23/00, 08/03/00; Notimex, 06/25/00, 08/03/0; Associated Press, 06/27/00, 08/03/0; Granma (Cuba), 08/02/00, 08/04/00]

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