

Cuba names a new vice president of cabinet

On October 14, 2008 Cuba named a new seventh vice president of the cabinet who will oversee the foreign trade and foreign investment ministries.

The new vice president is 71-year-old Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz. He was previously minister without portfolio. Cabrisas earlier was commerce minister and ambassador to Japan, and he is often called on to meet foreign dignitaries arriving in Cuba.

According to the Communist Party daily Granma the move was proposed by the party's ruling politburo. Fidel Castro still heads that body despite resigning as president in February due to illness.

Sources: AP, Miami Herald

Spain's Prime Minister Zapatero to visit Cuba next year

October 14, 2008 - Spain's prime minister accepted an invitation to visit Cuba next year setting him up to become the first European leader to travel to the communist-run island in nearly a decade.

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's Socialist government has played a key role in persuading the EU to lift diplomatic sanctions against Cuba, a step taken in June, and in pressing the island to improve its human rights record.

The sanctions were imposed in 2003 after Cuba jailed 75 dissidents. Twenty have since been released, but more than 200 dissidents are still serving jail terms in Cuba.

Details of Zapatero's trip still needed to be worked out but it will go ahead, Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said. The announcement was made after he met with his Cuban counterpart in Madrid.

The last time a European head of state or government visited Cuba was during the Ibero-American Summit held in Havana in November 1999. It was attended by King Juan Carlos and then-Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, as well as Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio.

Sources: AP

Cuban dissidents say Spanish Prime Minister must insist on prisoner releases

October 17, 2008 - Representatives of Cuban dissident groups say a visit to the communist-ruled island by Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero would only make sense if it is accompanied by a commitment by Havana to free political prisoners.

The visit "would be very positive if there was a response on the part of the Cuban government in the sense of freeing the peaceful prisoners of conscience and respecting human rights," economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, one of 75 government opponents arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in Spring 2003 for allegedly conspiring with the United States to undermine the revolution.

"If that were the case, we would welcome the visit; but if not, it makes no sense" because "in practice it would serve as (tacit) support for totalitarianism," said Espinosa, who was released from jail on medical grounds.

Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos said on Tuesday in Madrid that Zapatero had accepted an invitation from Cuba's president Raul Castro, to visit the island next year, but the Socialist premier indicated that his potential trip is a "project" that may or may not "go through."

"Regrettably, we don't see any gesture in that sense (of improvement in the human rights situation) but rather a worsening of the repression," said Espinosa, who added that dissidents should "be treated just as warmly" as Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque was in Madrid.

"For me it would be an affront if Spain were to come here without achieving anything," he added.

The leader of the opposition group Agenda for the Transition, Marta Beatriz Roque said for her part that "undoubtedly any freeing of political prisoners, anything that means the release of prisoners or the ending of the repression would be welcome."

Roque, the only woman among the 75 convicted in 2003 and also paroled for health reasons, said it is unfortunate that the visit is "part of a policy of support on the part of the Spanish government for its Cuban" counterpart.

But the leader of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, Elizardo Sanchez, told Efe that a "visit by any representative of a democratic government to Cuba will always be positive, given the anti-democratic nature of the island's government."

He added, however, that "it will always be difficult for some dignitary of a democratic country to come to Cuba and find that the jails are full of political prisoners, including 60 prisoners of conscience adopted by Amnesty International."

Sanchez's group puts the total number of Cuban political prisoners at around 220.

Hector Palacios, another member of the Group of 75 who was released for health reasons, said it was "regrettable" that Zapatero plans to visit the island "without the Cuban government having taken serious, viable and concrete steps" to improve its human rights record.

The leader of Cuban Change, Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, asked rhetorically: "What is (Zapatero) coming here to see? That here we have the same dictatorship of 50 years ago?"

Gutierrez recalled the visit to Cuba in 1986 by Spain's then-Prime Minister Felipe González, also a Socialist, and said "it was positive because he at least achieved my release ... among others."

"The right thing," he added, "is for (the Cuban government) to take real steps, like the European Union is demanding. So it's clear that progress is being made toward the democratization of the country," Gutierrez said.

"I'm not opposed (to the visit)" but it should be part of "concrete" initiatives to bring about change.

Source: EFE, Miami Herald

Czech Christian Democrats to support Cuban prisoners

The government coalition member Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) presented on October 14, 2008 project designed to point continued human rights violations in Cuba. The KDU-ČSL presents on its website already 15 cases of Cuban political prisoners.

About this initiative of the KDU-ČSL informed at the press conference attended by Cyril Svoboda, Czech minister and head of the Government Legislative Council.

The project entitled "Political prisoners, we know about you!" will every day present one foreign political prisoners on the KDU-ČSL website.

"It is very important to remember the people who are democrats, who are fighting for freedom and democracy anywhere in the world and who are persecuted for this. We must know about them and we must know their names," Svoboda said.

The KDU-ČSL has not consulted other parties on its project, he said.

Svoboda criticized the European Union for the abolition of the sanctions towards Cuba where the communist regime has ruled for almost 50 years. Czech diplomacy also agreed with the lifting of the sanctions in June and Svoboda said today that he considered this a mistake.

"The human rights situation has not improved there, on the contrary, it has worsened," Svoboda said.

The Czech Republic was for long one of the countries demanding a tough approach to Cuba and supporting the Cuban opposition. However, it has finally yielded to the pressure of such countries as Spain that demanded the resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba after Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro resigned from his office in February 2008.

Prague and other EU member states agreed to lift the sanctions under the condition that it will be possible to annually evaluate human rights situation in Cuba and to introduce new measures if the situation did not improve.

Svoboda, who was Czech foreign minister in 2002-2006, said that the question of human rights should become the axis of Czech foreign policy.

"It has long time became clear that the deviation from these principles does not bring the promised economic or other advantages," he said.

However, Svoboda stressed that he did not consider it fortunate to introduce general economic sanctions that mostly affect the population of the respective country, but not its undemocratic regime.

"The sanctions should apply to the people who are responsible for totalitarian rule," Svoboda said. The EU should, for instance, ban such leaders from entering its territory, he said.

The website of the KDU-ČSL with the cases of Cuban political prisoners in Czech language is accessible on http://www.kdu.cz/default.asp?page=51&IDR=10820&id_rok=14.

Sources: Prague Daily Monitor, ČTK, www.kdu.cz

Cuba - EU standoff ends with cooperation accord

Cuba and the European Union ended a five-year standoff on Thursday October 24, 2008 by signing an agreement that calls for EU members to send the island \$1.3 million in immediate hurricane recovery aid and up to \$38.8 million) more in financing next year.

The agreement signed by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque and E.U. Commissioner Louis Michel restarts dialogue and cooperation that stalled in 2003, when the communist government launched a crackdown and sentenced 75 dissidents to long prison terms.

"A reciprocal will exists to deepen a useful, positive and respectful political dialogue," Michel said.

Pérez Roque said Cuba welcomed the agreement because it imposed no conditions on the country, while still opening a path for dialogue "without interference in international affairs, and with mutual respect for political independence."

An EU delegation will return to Cuba in November to determine needs and priorities for next year's financing.

Thursday's agreement was made possible by the EU's June decision to eliminate the last remaining diplomatic sanctions imposed after the 2003 crackdown. Twenty of the original 75 prisoners have since been released for health reasons.

Source: Miami Herald

Russia military offers Cuba air defense aid

Russia will offer to share its air defense expertise with Cuba when a military delegation visits the Caribbean island this week, Interfax news agency reported on Monday October 27, 2008.

"The Russian and Cuban military will exchange experience in organizing tactical air defense and in training officers," Interfax quoted Russian Land Forces spokesman Igor Konashenkov as saying.

The delegation, led by the chief of Russia's tactical air defense headquarters, Lieutenant General Alexander Maslov, will also look at "ways to strengthen relations between the Russian armed forces and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba," Konashenkov was quoted as saying. According to Konashenkov, the delegation will be in Cuba from October 27 until November 3.

In the past few months, Moscow has stepped up contacts with both Cuba and Venezuela, another South American critic of the United States.

Source: Reuters