

EU commissioner criticized for snubbing Cuba's civil society

The European Union's development and humanitarian aid chief has come under fire after failing to meet with independent groups during his recent visit to Cuba. It is the policy of the European Council, the EU institution representing member states, that dialogue with Cuba should include the democratic opposition and civil society.

But Louis Michel, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, reportedly refused to meet with the dissidents' relatives group Women in White (Damas de Blanco) and declined requests to raise the issue of political prisoners. The Women in White, recipients of the European Parliament's Sakharov prize, were recently harassed by government supporters.

Another delegation member, Spanish socialist Miguel Martinez, a Vice- President of the European Parliament not only refused to meet the dissidents' relatives but happily meet with families of Cuban agents imprisoned in the United States.

Slovakia's Pontis Foundation, which actively supports Cuba's civil society and political prisoners, initiated the protests against Michel's snub. Ignacio Salafranca, a member of the European Parliament, raised the issue with the European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso who has promised to pursue the matter.

Announcing an additional 7.5 million euros (US\$10m) in hurricane response assistance to the communist state, Michel described the relationship between Cuban and the EU as "a fundamental one that will only improve".

Michel met with Havana's new Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez six years after the 27-nation EU partially suspended diplomatic relations in response to Cuba's "black spring" when the communist regime arrested 75 dissidents and independent journalists who subsequently received prison sentences ranging from six to 28 years.

Rodriguez said the regime was willing to discuss human rights with the EU but quickly backtracked when Michel referred specifically to Cuba's prisons.

Sources: Democracy Digest (<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/1862/eu-commissioner-criticized-for-snubbing-cubas-civil-society.html>), EPP-EDU TV (http://www.epp-edu.eu/tv/default_en.asp?vid_id=090326_report)

Dissidents asked to be imprisoned in show of solidarity

More than 30 dissidents went to five police stations in the capital on the anniversary of the arrest of the Group of 75 and asked that they be imprisoned themselves in an act of solidarity.

One of them, Dr. Darsi Ferrer, said the police at the Aguilera station knew beforehand of their planned activity March 18. "But they didn't try to stop us," he said. "On the contrary, they tried to avoid a scandal."

Ferrer said that five of them spent several hours in front of the station. "That was the least we could do for our imprisoned brothers," he said.

Sources: CubaNet, Miami Herald

Biden says U.S. does not plan to lift Cuba embargo

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said on Saturday March 28, 2009 the United States would not lift the country's embargo on Cuba. "No," Biden told reporters at a meeting in Chile when asked if the United States planned to lift the embargo.

"We think that Cuban people should determine their own fate and they should be able to live in freedom and have some prospect of economic prosperity," he added.

Several South American defense ministers this month urged President Barack Obama to lift the embargo on Cuba, saying such a move was crucial to improve U.S. ties with the region.

"Obama and I made it clear during our campaign that we thought there's a need for transition in our policy toward Cuba," Biden added.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation last month to ease restrictions on trade with Cuba and family travel to the island.

Supporters hoped the congressional action would be a first step toward reviewing and possibly reversing the decades-old U.S. policy of shunning Cuba.

Obama has made clear he favors relaxing limits on family travel and cash remittances by Cuban Americans to Cuba, although he has said the U.S. trade embargo should stay in place to press for democratic reforms.

Source: Reuters