

Most Cuban dissidents spurn Spanish overture

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HAVANA --

The Spanish Embassy on Wednesday offered to meet with opponents of Cuba's government after Madrid's top diplomat ended a three-day official visit to Havana without talking to dissidents.

But the offer was rejected by most dissidents, who said Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos spurned them during a trip to explore improving Spanish and European ties to communist-run Cuba.

'Moratinos' visit was a lack of respect, he came to support the tyranny," said Vladimiro Roca, a veteran opponent and former political prisoner who did not attend the embassy gathering.

The wives and mothers of political prisoners who form the Ladies in White also did not attend. Nor did writer Oscar Espinosa Chepe, one of 75 dissidents arrested in a March 2003 crackdown.

"Spain is not an interlocutor because it only hears some Cubans," said Espinosa Chepe, who was given a medical release from jail along with 15 others. "We don't want to be accomplices."

Historian Manuel Cuesta Morua was one of the few dissidents who agreed to meet with the Spanish diplomats. "The important thing is to plant a political agenda," he said.

Cuesta Morua also noted with satisfaction that Moratinos and his Cuban counterpart agreed during the visit to explore regular bilateral talks that could include a discussion of human rights.

"For the first time in many years the [Cuban] government has committed to a discussion of human rights," Cuesta Morua said.

Many governments and rights organizations around the world accuse Cuba of violating liberties by jailing critics and limiting speech and press freedoms.

Cuba's communist government rejects those charges, saying it respects human rights more than most nations by offering citizens a wide social safety net that includes free healthcare.