

EU urged to take stronger stance on Cuba

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BRUSSELS --

(AP) -- The European Union should strengthen its support for human rights in Cuba and dissident efforts to establish democracy there, a panel of European Parliament members said Thursday.

In a hearing to investigate the effectiveness of the EU's Common Position on Cuba less than two weeks before an official EU review of the policy, panelists agreed the EU needs to take a more aggressive stance in support of a peaceful transition to democracy.

"I cannot consider the EU approach toward Cuba as sufficient," said EU lawmaker Peter Stastny, a conservative from Slovakia. "More concrete and efficient measures are needed."

Stastny chaired a discussion between members of the EU parliament and Cuban opposition figures before a June 18 meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg that will review policy toward Cuba.

Portuguese conservative Jose Ribeiro e Castro suggested that the EU reestablish the sanctions on Cuba imposed in 2003 after authorities there detained 75 dissidents. The sanctions -- which included a ban on high-level talks with Cuban officials -- were lifted in 2005.

Former Cuban political prisoner Osvaldo Alfonso Valdes argued that recognition from democracies confers legitimacy on Fidel Castro's communist regime. "The political measures adopted in 2003 must be maintained," he said.

Blanca Reyes, a Cuban dissident now living in exile in Madrid, read a letter from the Ladies in White -- a group that protests peacefully against the detention of family members in Cuba -- urging the EU not to put trade and economic interests before human rights.

The Ladies in White received the EU's highest human rights prize in 2005 but were unable to acquire the visas to travel to Europe to accept it.