

Cuba rejects EU talks until it drops sanctions

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HAVANA --

Cuba on Friday bluntly rejected the European Union's calls for negotiations to warm relations with the communist-run island, saying Havana won't talk until the EU totally scraps sanctions it imposed on the country in 2003.

The Foreign Ministry seemed to suggest that the EU's calls for an "open and integral political dialogue" were a step in the right direction, but made clear that they were not enough.

"If the European Union wants some kind of dialogue with Cuba, it should definitively eliminate sanctions, which have since been shown to be inapplicable and unsustainable," the ministry said in a statement.

The EU reached out to Cuba on Monday, inviting top officials to Brussels for negotiations on the condition that they discuss improving human rights practices on the island. The invitation is part of the EU's drive to improve relations with Cuba, and it said the temporary transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl -- the first change of power in 48 years -- constituted a "new situation."

The EU imposed diplomatic sanctions on Cuba in 2003 after Cuban authorities detained 75 dissidents accused of working with the United States to undermine the government.

Cuban authorities released 16 of those detainees for medical reasons, and in January 2005, the EU suspended the measures, restoring diplomatic relations and ending its ban on talks with Cuban officials. But it also asked Havana to release political prisoners and grant freedom of expression and information to its citizens, and said it would continue supporting dissidents.

The Foreign Ministry did not mention human rights specifically, but said the EU's invitation for dialogue "meddles, in a slanderous way, in strictly internal Cuban affairs, making judgments and announcing unjust and hypocritical acts that Cuba considers offensive and unacceptable and rejects completely."

"We do not recognize the moral authority of the European Union to judge or advise Cuba," it said, adding that the island is "an independent and sovereign country" that deserves treatment as an equal.

Spain, which enraged Cuba with its staunch early support of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, now leads efforts to improve relations with Havana, while Britain, the Czech Republic, Poland and Sweden have been more guarded.

The EU is adamant that if Cuba accepts the invitation for talks, it must also agree to discuss human rights, political prisoners and moves toward democracy.

Many governments and rights organizations around the world accuse Cuba of violating liberties by jailing critics and limiting speech, Internet access, travel and media freedoms.

The Cuban government claims it respects human rights more than most nations by offering a wide social safety net that includes free healthcare and education and heavily subsidized food. Havana dismisses outspoken critics and dissidents as U.S. "mercenaries."

The Foreign Ministry's statement noted that "an influential group of European nations have made efforts" to improve Cuban-EU relations, but also accused the union in general and the Czech Republic specifically of pandering to Washington: "The European Union has shown it is persistently and humiliatingly subordinate to the United States."

"It is up to the European Union to make up for the mistakes committed with Cuba," the statement concluded.
"But there's no hurry; we have all the time in the world."