

U.N.: Cuban officials were at news conference

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GENEVA --

(AP) -- The United Nations has expressed regret that undercover Cuban officials attended a U.N. news conference on human rights, where they sought information on a French journalist asking critical questions about Fidel Castro's regime.

Elena Ponomareva, spokeswoman for the global body's European headquarters, said she was unable to prevent two Cuban diplomats from entering the Oct. 11 news event with Jean Ziegler, a U.N. rights expert who was preparing for a mission to the communist-run island.

The U.N. strictly prohibits government officials from attending news conferences unless they are explicitly invited and included among those presenting. Previous run-ins have occurred with Sudanese diplomats seeking to monitor rights officials speaking about Darfur.

The Cuban officials were present for a testy exchange between the French journalist and Ziegler, who said Havana should be praised for cooperating with the global body and agreeing to allow him to report on the country's respect for the "right to food" -- Ziegler's area of expertise.

Havana refused for years to allow U.N. envoys to visit and investigate alleged rights abuses in the country, claiming that such missions would violate Cuban sovereignty.

The Cuban officials asked journalists in the room to identify the name and agency of the journalist who debated Ziegler.

When the news conference ended and Ponomareva confronted the officials, they said they were diplomats at a U.N. mission, but declined to say which country they represented.

"I can only regret this incident," she wrote in a letter to the U.N. correspondents' association in Geneva. She said she would share her thoughts with Ziegler "concerning the presence of members of the mission of Cuba at the press conference."

Cuba has not received any information or a complaint from the U.N., said Marcos Gabriel at the Cuban mission.

Ziegler -- who hailed Cuba during his 11-day mission as a world model for how it provides its people with food -- could not be reached for comment.

The Swiss sociology professor was appointed as an unpaid, independent expert by the U.N. Human Rights Council, but his views do not necessarily represent those of the global body.

His 2005 comparison of the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip to an "immense concentration camp" drew a rebuke from the spokesman for then-U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. Ziegler also has clashed with Washington over his reports on growing malnutrition in Iraq since the U.S.-led toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003.