
Cuba, EU hold second Joint Council meeting in Havana

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EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini on Monday reaffirmed the bloc's drive to deepen trade with Cuba and counter a wave of lawsuits against European firms as Washington increases pressure on the communist-run island.

"Cuba is a key partner for us," Mogherini said in talks in Havana with her Cuban counterpart Bruno Rodriguez.

US President Donald Trump has tightened sanctions against Havana over rights violations and support for Venezuela's leftist regime.

The latest squeeze on the Cuban government's finances came last week when the US curbed the amount Cuban Americans could send home in lifeblood remittances.

But Washington's drive to cut off funds to Havana has exposed European firms to huge lawsuits from Cuban-Americans, an "illegal" move which Mogherini said the EU would counter.

"The European Union has constantly reiterated its position on considering illegal the extraterritorial application of the US measures," she said.

"We've made it clear to the US administration in previous years and months and we are now putting in place European Union measures to try to have an effective protection of European investments, of the European economic presence here in Cuba."

Trump activated a provision of the 1996 Helms-Burton law that allows Cuban-Americans to recover damages from companies that do business with the Cuban state.

The provision had been waived by every previous US president to avoid conflicts with friendly, mainly European countries with companies active in Cuba.

Since coming to office in 2017, Trump has dismantled the rapprochement with Havana begun by former US president Barack Obama.

On Monday, EU and Cuban officials held a meeting of the Cuba-EU council, created in 2016 to strengthen trade links. A first meeting of the council was held in Brussels in May last year.

"The holding of this second council is proof of progress in relations with the EU," Rodriguez said.

The rapprochement has paid off, the EU is now the largest investor in Cuba and its largest trading partner, with trade exceeding US\$3.47 billion in 2018.

Since 2008, the EU "has committed 200 million Euros to support the development of Cuba, in agriculture, food security, environment and climate change, "but also to accompany the modernization of the country," Mogherini said.

"We are at the best moment in the 25 years of relations between Cuba and the European Union," EU ambassador to Cuba Alberto Navarro said.
