
EU, Cuba hold new round of talks to normalise ties

04/03/2015



Cuba and the European Union will meet on Wednesday (Mar 4) and Thursday for a third round of negotiations aimed at normalising ties following the historic rapprochement between Havana and Washington.

The EU and Cuba, which began talks last year after ties were suspended in 2003, had initially planned to hold a third round in December before they were called off twice.

The new talks come after France announced on Tuesday that its President Francois Hollande will visit the island May 11 in what will be the first trip by a French head of state to Cuba.

This latest round is due to tackle the sensitive human rights dossier. It is part of an effort to move past more than a decade of disagreements and sanctions after Havana launched a crackdown and jailed 75 dissidents in a direct response to calls for liberalization and greater respect for human rights.

"Our agenda is focused on cooperation with the ambition to start dealing with the two other major topics - trade and political dialogue - and set the stage for the next steps," a European diplomat said in Spanish.

"We are negotiating a framework agreement, providing a legal frameworks for dialogue, cooperation and exchanges, including on governance and human rights," he added, requesting anonymity.

The talks will be led by European chief negotiator Christian Leffler and Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Abelardo Moreno. The pair headed the two previous rounds in Brussels in August and in Havana in April.

It will be the first meeting between the politico-economic bloc and Havana since the United States and Cuba surprised the world by announcing in December that they would restore relations after half a century of enmity.

ENCOURAGING REFORMS

The EU launched its normalisation process with the communist island to encourage President Raul Castro to pursue reforms allowing for private initiatives without changing the one-party political system.

Cuba is alone in Latin America in lacking a political dialogue with the EU.

The EU bases its approach to Cuba on a 1996 "common position" document stating that economic cooperation must go hand in hand with advances toward a pluralistic democracy and respect of human rights.

But the European diplomat said the EU had reached a deal with Cuba under which an agreement on political dialogue and cooperation could take place without the rights requirement of the common position.

An accord would facilitate European aid to the ailing Cuban economy, and favour the island's exports to the block. Cuban tobacco, one of the country's main exports, currently is subject to a 26 per cent tariff in the EU, slowing sales. Central American and Dominican tobacco are not subjected to tariffs.

Bilateral trade has increased, however, and the EU is Cuba's second biggest trading partner behind Venezuela, with exchanges valued at US\$3.7 billion in 2012, according to the latest Cuban government figures.
