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**EU, Latin American-Caribbean Group Seek Common Ground**

11/06/2015



“We want to strengthen the bonds of our enduring association, based on common objectives and mutual respect,” European Council President Donald Tusk said during the opening session in Brussels, attended by delegations from 61 countries.

“On both sides of the Atlantic, we believe in the primacy of international law, democracy and the self-determination of peoples,” said the summit co-chair, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa.

CELAC and the EU should focus over the next five years on battling poverty and inequality, promoting education, science and technology, addressing climate change and other environmental issues, financing development and maximizing the potential of the two regional organizations as an international bloc, Correa said.

“The eradication of poverty is a moral imperative for the planet,” he said.

Free-trade agreements are also a major topic at the summit, though talks between the EU and Mercosur – Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela – remain stalled.

“Brazil and Mercosur are in a position to present their trade offer to the EU in the coming days or months,” Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff said.

Despite the emphasis on the strategic partnership between the EU and CELAC, Wednesday’s session also made room for discussion of issues such as the budding Western rapprochement with Cuba, the peace process in Colombia and the charged political situation in Venezuela.

Regarding Colombia, Tusk announced the creation of an EU fund to support post-conflict initiatives once the government and leftist FARC rebels reach an accord.

On the subject of Cuba, the former Polish prime minister said the EU is committed to successfully concluding negotiations with Havana on a political agreement and that the European bloc hopes to see the “total normalization” of U.S.-Cuban relations and the end of Washington’s economic embargo against the island.

“We celebrate the triumph of the dignity and sovereignty of the Cuban people and the process of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba,” Correa said, while urging Washington to scrap the “inhumane and illegal” embargo and abandon its military enclave in Guantanamo.

Turning to Venezuela, Ecuador’s leader blasted President Barack Obama’s executive order proclaiming that the situation in the Andean nation poses a threat to U.S. national security.

That proclamation, which Washington has sought to minimize as a legal formality required to impose sanctions on individual Venezuelan officials accused of violating human rights, provoked both ridicule and outrage across Latin America.

In the Brussels Declaration that will be issued at the conclusion of the summit, the statement on Venezuela is limited to a “general reference” about the need to comply with international law and a pledge by the Europeans to “take note” of CELAC’s position, EU sources told Efe.

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