

## CONDITIONS FOR CHANGING THE EU'S POLICY TOWARDS CUBA

Brussels, 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2008

**The European Union should define clear and measurable benchmarks regarding the improvement of human and civil rights in Cuba before softening its position towards the country and starting negotiations for an economic and development agreement.**

This week the EU Common Position on Cuba will undergo its annual evaluation in the EU Council. There are voices calling for the "normalisation" of relations with Cuba and for an initiation of negotiations aiming at signing an economic and development agreement with Cuba since it is the only ACP country that doesn't have one. However, the EU Common Position on Cuba from 1996 clearly states that the intensification of dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Cuba is conditioned by an improvement in human rights and political freedoms on the island.

In the Europe Cuba NGO Network's opinion, there have been no significant changes in respect to human rights in Cuba, even though the regime has been trying hard to sell the image of a "new, changing Cuba".

Since Raul Castro officially came into power in February of this year, there has been a great deal of news about 'changes' on the island. Cubans have recently been given the 'right' to enter beaches and hotels in their own country, to buy mobile phones and computers, to buy fertilizers for their land and the Cuban government signed the U.N.'s International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The world has reacted to this news with great optimism and hope that there would soon come changes that would allow Cuba to become a free and democratic country. Sadly, no facts are pointing in this direction.

In the first five months of this year, the regime has detained and condemned 22 dissidents, 13 of whom are still in prison. The reasons for these condemnations were the usual vague accusations of potential dangerousness, insulting the state or meeting subversive elements, when in reality the detentions and imprisonments were because of activities, such as peaceful demonstrations, articles about substandard life conditions in certain areas or contacting dissidents. Just wearing a t-shirt saying "Abajo Fidel" warranted two years of imprisonment for its owner.

Prison conditions in Cuba continue to be inhumane, as they are extremely unhygienic, violent, there is a lack of adequate food and potable water and they are breeding grounds for epidemic diseases and serious illnesses like tuberculosis or diarrhea. Furthermore, Cuba refuses to grant access to 'prisoners of conscience' for the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian and human rights organizations.

In recent weeks, a public campaign against members of the opposition and civil society activists has started, accusing them of having ties with terrorist organizations. The government has been showing pictures and videos documenting their private lives and correspondence on television. Members of the Cuban parliament are calling for strengthening of the Law 88 (Law of Protection of National Independence and Economy), a law routinely applied against dissidents, sentencing them for any activity considered anti-revolutionary to penalties up to 20 years of prison.

We believe that if a shift in EU policy towards Cuba is supposed to follow a change of behaviour of the Cuban regime towards its people, there should be some indicators enabling

us to judge whether there has really been any change and to what extent has it been significant for the situation of human and civil rights in Cuba.

Before changing its position, the EU should define clear and measurable benchmarks in order to have legitimate reason for cooperation with the Cuban communist regime. Without having these benchmarks the EU puts itself in a danger of acting on the basis of either individual interests of some Member States or the public relations campaign carried out by the Cuban government and not on a basis of principles and long term objectives.

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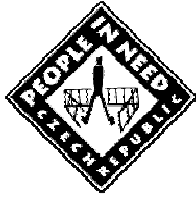
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