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CUBA | NGOs Urge EU to Adopt Benchmarks on Human Rights

The Europe Cuba Network, a group of 19 European non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), has issued a statement calling on the European Union (EU) to adopt red-lines and clear benchmarks to measure progress in the area of human rights before entering into a new association agreement with Cuba.

The statement is a response to the news that the EU will pursue a new association agreement with Cuba that will effectively normalize relations between the two. The agreement would replace the Common Position, in place since 1997, which is critical of Cuba's harsh repression of human rights. The NGOs are concerned this major change in policy comes even as Cuba's human rights record has worsened.

The statement lists specific recommendations to the EU in regard to the promotion of human rights in Cuba and also highlights a number of recent cases that illustrate the ongoing and serious violations of human rights under the leadership of Raul Castro. Among the issues raised is the fact that violations of religious freedom have more than quadrupled over the past three years, according to documentation by CSW.

Events this year seem to indicate the government's targeting of religious groups is set to continue. On Feb. 9, more than 160 men and women linked to independent civil society groups were arrested and detained in the province of Santiago, in order to prevent them from attending Mass. This week, a protestant pastor, Yordanis Santi Pérez, of the Independent Evangelical Church in Zulueta, Santa Clara, received a citation to present himself to State Security after his detention last week. Rev. Santi Pérez was detained as he visited former prisoner of conscience, Jorge Luis Garcia Pérez, also known as Antúnez, to pray for him as he was carrying out a hunger strike. Government officials told Rev. Santi Perez: "We don't want you praying for anyone here in Placetas." Also this week, local government officials in Santiago de Cuba issued an order to confiscate and demolish the home of Esmir Torreblanca, the legal owner of a house church affiliated with the Apostolic Movement.

The NGOs welcome EU Ambassador Herman Portocarero's statement that issues such as 'human rights' and the 'legal status of civil society organizations remain a 'red line' for the EU, however, they continue to call for clear benchmarks as to how improvement in these areas will be measured and defined. The group points out that opening negotiations to restore full relations with Cuba even as a massive crackdown on human rights activists and civil society organizations is taking place contradicts and severely weakens these 'red lines' to the point of making them meaningless.

The Europe Cuba Network also notes that attempts in recent years by the EU to open a human rights dialogue with the Cuba never came to fruition because of a failure on the part of the Cuban regime to participate, “A human rights dialogue must be a central component of any relationship between Cuba and the EU; explicit and public guarantees of participation by the Cuban regime must be made.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We sincerely hope that the EU will pay close attention to the recommendations and concerns highlighted in this joint statement. The EU has always prided itself in making the respect for human rights and democracy a key component of all of its internal and external policy. An association agreement based on these principles would be welcome, but the Cuban government must fully and publicly commit to improving its human rights record. One key step would be the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Cuba’s failure to do so thus far, six years after signing the treaties to much fanfare, and its ongoing crackdown on human rights, including religious freedom, do little to indicate that they have any serious commitment to improvement in this area. We urge the EU to proceed with caution and to insist on clear benchmarks and red lines on human rights issues as they enter into discussions with the Castro regime.”