Relations between the European Union/Cuba

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OBJECTIVE: to provide an initial idea of current relations between the European Union and Cuba, focusing on the economic and political situation in Cuba and the potential for instituting a dialogue between the EU and Cuba. CONTENT: this communication explains why Cuba needs a new international and regional profile and why the European Union needs to use its specific weight to exert a dynamic force here if this country is to make a peaceful and successful transition to a market economy and political pluralism. . Economic and political situation: changes have taken place in Cuba following the abolition of COMECON in 1989. Economic reforms have already been adopted and other reforms have been announced (mainly in agriculture, foreign investment, small independent companies and corporate restructuring). As far as respect for human rights in concerned, Cuba is still a long way from meeting European democratic criteria, but the situation appears to be changing for the better since an information mission on prisoners of conscience was set up, followed by the release of Sebastian Arcos. . As far as relations between the Union and Cuba are concerned, Cuba is currently the only Latin American country with which the Community has no cooperation agreement. However, there is free trade between the parties (Cuba benefits from the SPG) and diplomatic relations exist through the ambassadors of 11 Member States resident in Cuba and the head of the Commission delegation based in Mexico. The European Parliament, for its part, has set out its position vis-à-vis this country in 2 resolutions (condemning the Torricelli law strengthening the embargo in 1993 and in a resolution on the "balseros" crisis in 1994, in which it called on the Community to start negotiations with a view to concluding a cooperation agreement). As far as specific Community action is concerned, regular humanitarian aid is organized, together with one-off projects to support the reforms started in 1993 (humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable sections of the Cuban population, training programmes for bosses of Cuban companies) with the result that total cooperation aid rose from ECU 500,000 in 1994 to ECU 5 million in 1995. . The communication also gives a summary description of relations between Cuba and the United States. Although still strained, relations are evolving slowly and are firmly on the political agenda. The embargo is not conducive to the rapid development of Cuba and trade between the two states would without doubt help the system to change. The Commission draws particular attention to the fact that any hardening of the situation (especially the Helms-Burton bill) would be fatal for Cuba, although the Clinton administration does, for its part, appear to be in favour of a less black-and-white policy. . As far as future relations between the EC and Cuba are concerned, the Commission feels that the Union is in the best position to launch an initiative to support reform in Cuba and could, in agreement with Cuba's neighbouring partners, launch a dialogue which might bring other countries such as Mexico on board. This dialogue would take the form of consultations with Cuban contacts, taking account of the economic and institutional reforms under way, and would cover reforms and the development of civil society, guarantees of greater private initiative and more individual freedoms and the form and content of future relations between the EU and Cuba. In conclusion, the Commission could, if the Council agreed, start exploratory discussions with a view to identifying a framework for future relations between the EU and Cuba.