

For Immediate Release

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**CUBA: JOINT STATEMENT ON LOUIS MICHEL'S CALL TO
NORMALISE RELATIONS WITH CUBA**

The following is a joint statement issued by NGOs from across Europe working on the defence of human rights, the promotion of democracy, and support for civil society in Cuba.

Following his recent visit to Cuba, Louis Michel, the European Commissioner for Development, has publicly called for the European Union to normalise relations with the Cuban government. He has referred to EU sanctions, which are currently suspended, as the main obstacle to doing so.

The EU sanctions were first put in place in 2003 in response to a massive crackdown against independent journalists, human rights defenders, democracy activists and independent librarians, among others in March of the same year. 75 Cubans were arrested, subjected to summary trials and handed down lengthy prison sentences.

The EU Common Position, originally approved in 1996, states clearly that "the objective of the European Union in its relations with Cuba is to encourage a process of transition to pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as a sustainable recovery and improvement in the living standards of the Cuban people." The Cuban government has repeatedly violated these principles. Consistency on the part of the EU is vital at this time to show that these ideals are not mere rhetorical flourishes, but a rather, a real commitment on the part of the EU and its member states to certain values and rights.

Five years after the Black Spring of 2003, little has changed in Cuba:

- No moves towards a transition to a true democracy in Cuba have taken place. Instead, one dictator has been replaced with another and top positions have been given to noted hardliners.
- Approximately 230 political prisoners continue to languish in Cuban prisons, including 55 of the 75 prisoners of conscience arrested in 2003. Almost all of the

prisoners who have been released were critically ill and were forced to leave the country upon their release. The families of prisoners consistently report physical mistreatment, violations of religious rights, and horrific conditions inside the prisons. Furthermore, there are well documented cases of new political prisoners since 2003. None of this indicates to us any real commitment on the part of the Cuban authorities to seriously addressing this problem.

- In its Common Position, the EU pledges to facilitate peaceful change in Cuba and promote respect for human rights by intensifying the dialogue with the government and “all sectors of Cuban society.” However, during his visit, Commissioner Michel did not meet with a single representative of Cuban civil society, including human rights defenders or pro-democracy activists, nor did he meet with any families of political prisoners. It is worth noting that Commissioner Michel also failed to meet with past Sakharov Prize winners, Oswaldo Paya and representatives from the Ladies in White, who have all been prohibited from travelling to Europe to receive their prize.
- According to Commissioner Michel's aide, Stefano Manservigi, “he found that economic and political changes, including advances in human rights, are in the pipeline, though they may take time and are not being publicly broadcast by the new leadership.” We are not against “engagement” with the Cuban government in principle, but strongly believe that any engagement must be conditional and based on concrete, measurable improvements in the area of human rights and not on vague promises of undefined improvements in the future.

We do not believe that this is the time for the European Union to remove its sanctions against the Cuban government. While we welcome the fact that Cuba recently signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Cultural and Social Rights, the rights enshrined within these treaties are not yet reflected in Cuban law or practice. We believe that legislative changes to ensure that these rights are guaranteed under Cuban law would be a significant step which would merit the normalising of relations.

Removing the sanctions at this point would require no real concession on the part of the Cuban government. Instead, the message that the EU would be sending, not only to the Cuban regime but to other authoritarian governments, like those in Burma and Belarus, is that there is little reason to take the EU's calls for democratic and human rights reform seriously, since even symbolic sanctions can be so easily brushed aside.

It is imperative that the EU make it clear to the Cuban government that the true obstacles to normal relations are the systematic violation of human rights in Cuba and a failure to implement any democratic reforms.

We call on EU member states to reject any move to remove sanctions and normalise relations with the Cuban government at this time. We call on all of the EU institutions to continue to send clear signals to the political, military and economic elites in Havana

that the EU will not engage in greater cooperation until the Cuban regime takes concrete steps and makes measurable changes in regards to democracy and rule of law.



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