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SUBJECT: VATICAN OFFICIAL ON CUBA RELATIONS WITH EU AND U.S.

REF: STATE 131637

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CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael P. Foley, Pol Chief.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Vatican's point person on Cuba, Monsignor Accattino, supports EU dialogue with Cuba and said the U.S. should refrain from unilateral actions against Cuba that play into the hands of the Castros - or Hugo Chavez. This is particularly true, he said, of decisions like identifying Cubans as nationals of particular concern in air travel. The Vatican is concerned that the disastrous economic situation on the island and political tension could lead to bloodshed. Accattino added the "new Fidel Castro" in the Western Hemisphere is Chavez. In a separate meeting, another Vatican official recommended that the U.S. do everything within its power to ensure low rates for Cubans phoning the U.S. End summary.

EU Should Engage Cuba

¶2. (C) DCM and polchief met with Accattino on January 14 to discuss USG views on EU dialogue with Cuba (ref. A). Accattino was ambivalent about the pros and cons of a common EU position on Cuba. He said it was important to coordinate approaches, but implied a preference for the soft approach of Spain over that of Poland or the Czech Republic as being more conducive to a positive response from the Cubans. Nevertheless, he conceded that human rights should be part of the agenda in EU dialogue with Cuba and in specific European capitals' individual dialogues with Havana. However, he thought that the island's blatantly poor human rights record should not block engagement with Cuba any more than it does with other rights-abusing nations. After all, he said, the U.S. and the EU engage other countries that violate human rights, like China.

U.S. Should Not Be a Hostage to Cuba

¶3. (C) Accattino thought U.S. domestic politics had a counterproductive impact on USG-Cuba policy. As an example, he pointed to the recent USG decision to expand screening of Cubans entering the U.S. by air. Despite being a state sponsor of terrorism, Cuba does not really pose a real threat to the U.S., he said, so the designation was purely for domestic political reasons. Accattino thought this was unjustified, and played into regime hard-liners' portrayal of the U.S. as intrinsically hostile.

¶4. (C) Looking ahead, Accattino said Cuba's economic and social situations are becoming so bad that people could react violently. If that happens, he added, some in and outside of Cuba could blame the U.S. for having contributed to the situation. The U.S. should not allow itself to be held hostage by domestic politics to maintain the current "counterproductive policy."

¶5. (C) Moreover, Accattino thought that U.S. policies toward Cuba help Chavez, "who is the true, new successor of Fidel Castro in Latin America." Unlike Fidel, he added, Chavez has oil revenues to support his Bolivarian revolution.

Keep Those Phone Rates Low

¶6. (C) In a separate conversation with the Ambassador on the

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margins of a reception on January 15, Monsignor Nicolas Thevenin, the political advisor to Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone, commended the U.S. for allowing U.S. telecommunication companies pursue business in Cuba. Thevenin, who served as a Vatican diplomat in Cuba years ago, continues to follow developments on the island. He hoped the USG could lean on telecommunications companies to make sure that rates for Cubans to call the U.S. would be very low. This, he thought, could have a positive impact in promoting political change.

Comment

¶7. (C) Accattino reiterated the Vatican line about always engaging in dialogue, no matter how unpleasant the interlocutor. He also made it clear that the Vatican is far more concerned about Chavez than Raul Castro, considering him more dangerous and with a longer reach (not to mention younger). For this reason, the Vatican has welcomed recent USG gestures towards Cuba warmly and advocates further USG actions that, the Vatican

believes, would make it increasingly difficult for Caracas or Havana to blame Cuba's economic and social failures on Washington. End comment.

DIAZ