

Cuba Signs Broad Pact With Canada

Ottawa's Envoy Blasts
U.S. Law, Offers
Cooperation on Rights

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HAVANA, Jan. 22—Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, in a sharp rebuke to U.S. efforts to isolate the government of President Fidel Castro, wound up a two-day visit here today by announcing a 14-point agreement with Havana pledging cooperation on human rights and seeking to shield foreign investors targeted for punishment by Washington.

In a joint statement, Axworthy and Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina said Canada and Cuba had agreed to "broadening and deepening cooperation on the issues of human rights" through joint seminars here and in Canada and "academic exchanges between officials, professionals and experts." Neither Axworthy nor Robaina spelled out exactly what that would mean in practice.

The agreement also calls for unspecified cooperation in combating the Helms-Burton Act, a U.S. law aimed at punishing foreign companies that do business with Cuba. In addition, the two countries agreed to increase cooperation in combating drug trafficking and international terrorism and to broaden economic ties, and Canada pledged to provide Cuba with food and medical aid.

Despite its lack of specifics, the agreement amounts to the broadest commitment yet by a major U.S. ally to work closely with the Castro government and represents the sharp-

See CUBA, A22, Col. 1

CUBA, From A1

est division between Washington and Ottawa over Cuban policy.

Unlike the United States, which has maintained a trade embargo on Cuba since 1962, one year after it severed ties with the Castro government, Canada maintains normal diplomatic relations and is Cuba's largest trading partner. Canadian companies have some \$500 million worth of investments in Cuba, the only Marxist state in the Western Hemisphere, and the Ottawa government strongly opposes Helms-Burton, as do other important U.S. allies.

At a joint news conference with Robaina this afternoon, Axworthy blasted Helms-Burton for "undermining the fundamental principles of international law" and called it a "virus in the system" of world order.

Washington and Ottawa also differ sharply on how to approach Cuba on the subject of human rights. Foreign nations and human rights groups have long accused Cuba—a one-party Communist state where political organizing outside the party structure is not tolerated—of repeated rights abuses, and the Castro government is extremely sensitive to such criticism.

Axworthy, the highest-ranking Canadian official to visit Cuba since 1976, said Canada believes it can

help bring change to Cuba "through active engagement and dialogue," clearly differentiating his position from the U.S. policy of strict isolation.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said tonight that the United States would withhold comment on the agreement until officials had had a chance to study it.

On Tuesday, Burns had said of Axworthy's visit: "It doesn't make sense to reward a dictator in our hemisphere who is completely behind the times. You reward him by sending your foreign minister down to visit, by having visits as usual, by trading. And we think that is wrong."

But today, after calling the Canadian Embassy in Washington to clarify his statement, Burns said that Axworthy "was raising human rights issues in Cuba during his visit, and that is a very good thing. Frankly, the United States remains skeptical that the Cuban government is in fact prepared to take systematic and meaningful steps that would lead . . . to a transition to democratic rule."

A spokesman for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R.-N.C.), who co-authored the Helms-Burton Act with Rep. Dan Burton (R.-Ind), called today's agreement "a sham."

"It actually has achieved nothing

on human rights," said the spokesman, Marc Thiessen. Axworthy "went to Cuba with one purpose: to poke a finger in the eye of the United States. It's shameful. . . . If he thinks it's a substantial agreement that will improve the human rights of one citizen, I have a bridge to sell him."

Axworthy met with Castro for a three-hour dinner Tuesday night and for an unscheduled lunch today that lasted nearly as long. He said the talks were cordial and wide-ranging, touching on human rights and economic issues, but declined to give details.

He called his visit "a good begin-

ning, a good start. It is a work in progress, but opened up all kinds of possibilities."

Asked if he had requested the release of specific political prisoners in Cuba, Axworthy responded, "Yes." But he did not say if he had received a specific commitment to release anyone. He said he had requested information on the arrest Tuesday of three dissidents who were trying to produce independent economic and news reports and had been assured by the Cuban government that the three had been released after a few hours in detention.

Robaina said the dissidents had been seeking to stage an incident to draw attention away from Axworthy's visit.

In addition to the measures regarding trade and human rights, today's Canadian-Cuban agreement also calls for joint cooperation "in the area of the administration of justice," including the exchange of judges and judicial training.

The two countries also will negotiate a "Foreign Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement" regarding ways countries can strike

back at the United States for Helms-Burton. Again, no specifics on what the agreement would do were given. Both countries already have adopted laws that allow their nationals to sue the United States if affected by Helms-Burton.

Axworthy's visit clearly advanced the Cuban government's efforts to rejoin the international community as a member in good standing, and Ro-

baina went out of his way to thank the Canadians for seeking to understand Cuba, rather than simply condemn a situation they had not studied.

The visit, Robaina said, "shows there is a very promising future" in relations because Canada sought agreement on issues through "mutual respect." He said there was not a single issue that was not explored in detail, including human rights.