

Clinton 'Skeptical' on Canada-Cuba Pact

President Foresees Little Likelihood of Advancement on Human Rights

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President Clinton offered a low-key response yesterday to Canada's agreement to work with Cuba on human rights issues, saying it is unlikely to produce results but refraining from criticizing the Canadians for making the unusual arrangement.

"My reaction is, I'm gratified that the Canadians, along with the Europeans, are now talking more to the Cubans about human rights and democratic reforms," Clinton said after a meeting with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.

He added, however, "I'm skeptical, frankly, that it will—that the recent discussions between the Canadians and the Cubans will lead to advances." The president said he believes the U.S. policy of trying to isolate and weaken the regime of Cuban President Fidel Castro "is the proper one, but I'm glad that the Canadians are trying to make something good happen in Cuba."

Canada has never signed on with the U.S. economic embargo on Cuba and in fact is Cuba's largest trading partner. The Canadians reacted with fury last year when Clinton signed legislation known as the Helms-Burton Act that seeks to block foreign corporations—including those in Canada—from investing in Cuba.

Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy met Castro in Havana this week and on Wednesday Canada and Cuba announced a 14-point agreement under which the two agreed to cooperate in advancing human rights, combating narcotics traffic and opposing Helms-Burton.

It is unusual if not unprecedented for Castro to agree to discuss the human rights situation in Cuba with outsiders. But State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said that "the United States sees nothing in the communique . . . which suggests an openness to any kind of fundamental reform on the part of the Cuban government."

As for Axworthy's visit, Burns

said, "We're not in a position to judge the travel of other, you know, other countries' diplomats. . . . Countries have to make their own decisions, and the United States must respect the right of countries to make those decisions. We will stand up for our own policy."

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), co-author of Helms-Burton, was considerably less charitable toward Axworthy, likening him to Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister who appeased Hitler.

"Do you remember Neville Chamberlain?" Helms asked reporters after his own meeting with Annan. "That's what Canada is."

In Ottawa, Axworthy said he had no illusions about the pace or even the certainty of democratic change in Cuba. But he said his trip shows Canada's policy of engagement will be more successful than "holding a megaphone in a Senate committee room."

Axworthy said that follow-up missions by Canadian jurists, bankers and others, beginning as soon as next month, will continue a debate over political and civil reform in Cuba that he feels the island is ready to begin in earnest. He said Cuban officials approached Canada last spring about opening trade and political talks—a sign, Axworthy felt, that Cuba realizes it is now dependent on the international community for hard currency, technology and economic development.

It took several months for an agenda to develop, but by December the trip looked certain enough that he told Commerce Undersecretary Stuart Eizenstat about his plans. Eizenstat was assigned by Clinton last year to try to persuade U.S. allies

such as Canada to challenge Cuba more vigorously over its human rights policies.

"I didn't expect the U.S. reaction to be bouquet and flowers," Axworthy said, but he added that neither did Eizenstat "bang his shoe on the table" when informed of Canada's intentions.

In a meeting here with foreign journalists, Axworthy would not comment directly on why Cuba initially approached Canada, or on whether there is movement in Castro's government to begin preparing for the day when the 70-year-old leader leaves power.

But he said he is convinced, from the testimony of Canadian diplomats and aid groups active in the country, that Cuba is "lightening up substantially. It zig-zags a little but it is there."

Schneider reported from Ottawa.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For statistics and regulations from the Canadian government on trade with Cuba, as well as its official response to the Helms-Burton Act, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>