

French President Francois Hollande on Official Visit to Cuba



Havana, May 11 (RHC) -- French President Francois Hollande has arrived in Cuba, beginning the first visit to Cuba by a French president since Havana and Paris established diplomatic relations over one hundred years ago -- on June 11, 1902.

Hollande arrived late Sunday evening at Havana's José Martí International Airport and was greeted by Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister Rogelio Sierra. Upon his arrival, the French president said: "I come to Cuba with great emotion because it is the first time that a president of the French Republic has come to Cuba." And Hollande added: "There are historic ties, deep ties, between the people of France and the people of Cuba," applauding Cuba's long-time commitment to independence. "We expect to jointly work for regional cooperation and these are the reasons for my visit."

The three-day visit is aimed at boosting French and European Union interests in Cuba, which he said aims to enter a new phase of economic and social development. However, he emphasized that the lifting

of the U.S. economic blockade on Havana would be instrumental in Cuba's future transformation, adding that the Caribbean island has been a victim of Washington's sanctions.

Several agreements will be signed during the official visit, although details of the accords have not yet been made public. Hollande said the accords would focus on improved access to Latin American markets.

Hollande has already made stops in Saint-Barthelemy, Saint-Martin, Martinique, Guadeloupe and will end his regional visit in Haiti on Tuesday.

France, which has made its relations with Latin America and the Caribbean a foreign policy priority, has been a strong supporter of the normalization of ties between Cuba and the 28-member European Union, currently holding talks to reset their political relations.

Trade between France and Cuba is modest, worth around \$388 million a year. Hollande is accompanied by a 60-member-strong delegations of business executives interested in strengthening or developing trade ties with Cuba.

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