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**Cuba criticizes \$9B US fine for French bank**

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Havana on Thursday protested U.S. penalties levied against France's largest bank over allegations it processed financial transactions for Cuba and other blacklisted states in violation of U.S. trade sanctions.

In a statement published by Cuban official media, the Foreign Ministry said the penalties "violate the rules of international law and qualify as an extraterritorial and illegal application of American legislation against a foreign entity."

The U.S. Justice Department announced Monday that BNP Paribas had agreed to pay nearly \$9 billion to settle the case. Under the deal, the Paris-based bank entered a guilty plea in a New York Court and acknowledged processing billions of dollars in transactions for clients in Cuba, Sudan and Iran.

U.S. prosecutors said the transactions were handled by BNP's New York branch office from at least 2004 through 2012.

"Sanctions are a key tool in protecting U.S. national security interests, but they only work if they are strictly enforced," Attorney General Eric Holder said earlier this week. "If sanctions are to have teeth, violations must be strictly punished."

But the Cuban Foreign Ministry questioned the legitimacy of Washington's 52-year-old embargo, which aims to isolate Communist-run Cuba economically and financially, and alluded to the annual, near-unanimous U.N. General Assembly votes calling for an end to what Havana refers to as a "blockade."

"Once again, the U.S. government ignores the overwhelming international rejection of this criminal and failed policy against our nation," the statement said. "With actions like this, it also ignores the increasing calls from different sectors of American society in favor of a fundamental change in policy toward Cuba."

U.S. authorities have targeted several banks in recent years for similar cases involving trade sanctions against Cuba and other nations.

In December 2012, Havana objected to a \$1.9 billion fine against London-based HSBC, Europe's largest bank, and an \$8.6 million settlement with Japan's Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ.

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