

STATEMENT BY
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND WELLNESS
OF THE
HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to testify, on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), concerning the continuing human rights violations of the Castro dictatorship in Cuba, and the importance of a vigorous international response on behalf of the Cuban people. I request that this statement be submitted for the record.

Assistant Secretary Noriega, in his testimony to you this morning, has well described the increasingly repressive actions of the Cuban state, the recent summary executions of three young men who tried to escape the island, and the imprisonment of more than 75 new political prisoners whose only crime was to peacefully pursue their basic human rights.

The actions of the Cuban government are outrageous and indefensible. But they are not new. Fidel Castro has systematically repressed the Cuban people for the past 44 years. What is new is the growing strength of Cuba's peaceful democratic opposition. An independent civil society has begun to emerge in Cuba. It deserves the support of free people everywhere. Certainly, we in the United States must do what we have always done - hold high the banner of freedom, and keep the flame of liberty alive.

Since passage of the *Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996*, the United States Agency for International Development has worked closely with the U.S. Department of State and U.S. non-governmental organizations to promote a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba, by increasing the flow of accurate

information on democracy, human rights and free enterprise to, from, and within Cuba.

As authorized by Section 109 of the *LIBERTAD Act*, USAID has provided 25 million dollars over the past six years to U.S. non-governmental organizations to build solidarity with Cuba's human rights activists, give voice to Cuba's independent journalists, defend the rights of Cuban workers, help develop independent Cuban non-governmental organizations, and provide direct outreach to the Cuban people.

In spite of the active opposition of the Cuban government, USAID grantees have delivered more than 150 thousand pounds of food and medicine to the families of political prisoners and other victims of repression in Cuba. They have provided more than ten thousand short-wave radios to the Cuban people so they can listen to Radio Marti, Voice of America, the BBC, Radio Netherlands, and other uncensored international broadcasts.

USAID grantees have sent the Cuban people more than 2 million books, newsletters, video cassettes and other informational material concerning democracy, human rights, and free enterprise. USAID grantees have published worldwide via the internet more than 9,000 reports from Cuba's independent journalists.

Most importantly, grantees disseminate those reports in hard copy throughout Cuba, so the Cuban people, from one end of the island to the other, can learn the names of Cuba's opposition leaders debate their ideas and draw strength from their courage.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the Cuban people suffer the most basic deprivations, of body as well as spirit, because of the failed policies of the Castro government. Their thirst for freedom, their hunger for truth is matched by physical hunger and thirst, by real malnutrition and disease.

The President of the United States has repeatedly offered emergency food and humanitarian assistance to the Cuban people, but Fidel Castro has always rejected that assistance. Castro not only denies the Cuban people the right to vote, the right to read, the right to speak. He denies the Cuban people the right to eat!

Castro blames all of his government's economic failures on the U.S. embargo, but it is not U.S. policy which is responsible for the dismal failure of Cuban agriculture to feed its own people. A country rich in agricultural potential, with plentiful supplies of labor, cannot supply

its population with meat, and has imported most of its rice, beans, and even fish for the past 40 years.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 13 percent of the Cuban population is chronically undernourished. The World Food Program has found serious deficiencies in dietary intake in eastern Cuba, where the average diet provides less than 80 percent of the minimum level of proteins, less than 50 percent of necessary fats, and insufficient vitamin and mineral intake for sustained health.

Perhaps the most common food-related public health problem in Cuba is iron-deficiency anemia, primarily among pregnant women and small children. According to the Pan American Health Organization, approximately fifty percent of children from one to three years of age are anemic in Cuba, as well as forty percent of women in the third trimester of pregnancy and between twenty-five and thirty percent of women of child-bearing age.

The Castro regime seems determined to deny its people a decent amount of food, so they will be too physically weak and too busy trying to provide for their families to demand other human rights.

As the President said in his speech last Friday, October 10, "clearly the Castro regime will not change by its own choice. But Cuba must change." In announcing new initiatives to hasten the arrival of a new, free, democratic Cuba, the President announced he will establish a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, "to plan for the happy day when Castro's regime is no more and democracy comes to the island.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of USAID Administrator, Andrew Natsios, I pledge the full support of the United States Agency for International Development to the work of the Commission.

Andrew Natsios, in a paper he published several years ago, before assuming his present post, discussed the need to plan now for humanitarian assistance to a future transition government in Cuba. His analysis, which represents his own personal views, concluded with a number of specific recommendations that will help us and the new Commission begin this work. I ask that a copy of his important paper be placed in the record.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your continuing support and that of the subcommittee for our work to promote a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. Now, more than ever, your support to the new Presidential Commission will ensure vital assistance to the Cuban people as they struggle

to secure their most fundamental freedoms and as they begin to hope for the day when they can begin to build a prosperous economic future.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for this opportunity to appear before you this afternoon and I welcome any questions that you and present Subcommittee Members may have for me.