

**Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Government Reform Committee
Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness**

**“Living in Fear: The Continued Human Rights Abuses in Castro’s
Cuba.”**

June 16, 2004

The Subcommittee is convening today to examine the atrocious human rights violations Cubans continue to suffer at the hands of the oppressive, totalitarian regime led by Fidel Castro. We are also going to discuss what the proper current United States response should be in further supporting peace advocates and promoting the development of democracy in the island nation of Cuba.

An individual’s freedom should be his or her most basic human right. Throughout Castro’s 45 years of tyrannical regime, he has continuously arrested and detained people who speak openly about their contrary governmental views. Even under the most heinous of conditions, many Cubans who live under Castro’s iron fist consistently demonstrate their resilience and continue to fight against the numerous injustices they are forced to endure.

Since Castro assumed control of Cuba on January 1, 1959, fundamental human rights and basic living conditions have deteriorated tremendously. Most Cuban people live every day in fear of their government, thousands of whom risk their lives every year

to flee the communist regime by any means necessary – even attempting to brave the hazardous 90-mile crossing between the United States and Cuba on makeshift rafts.

Recent events in Cuba have further opened the eyes of the world community to the true evil nature of the Castro Regime. Over the past two years, Fidel Castro has created a constitutional amendment permanently making socialism the official form of state government, as well as posturing himself to remain in power until he is forcibly removed or deceased. In addition to these totalitarian mandates, he staged the most sweeping crackdown on peaceful advocates of change in the history of Cuba.

On March 18, 2003, Fidel Castro ordered the arrest of many writers, poets, librarians, and pro-democracy activists in a large-scale operation to stifle any movement against his regime. Subsequently, some of the targeted individuals were released, but 75 remained in jail to be tried for their “crimes” against the country, citing Article 91 of Cuba’s Penal Code that states, “(anyone) who in the interest of a foreign state, commits an act with the objective of damaging the independence or territorial integrity of the state of Cuba”. The Cuban government accused the dissidents of engaging in activities that could be perceived as damaging to Cuba’s internal order, and / or perceived as encouraging to United States embargoes against the country.

Since then, the United States, along with many other freedom-loving world nations and international governing bodies, has taken actions in response to the harsh imprisonment of political dissidents in Cuba. The U.S. has both imposed stricter

sanctions against Cuba, as well as encouraged other world communities to place further resolutions and sanctions on Cuba. On April 15, 2004, the United Nations Human Rights Commission convened and voted on a U.S. –backed resolution stating that Cuba “should refrain from adopting measures which could jeopardize the fundamental rights” of its citizens. The measure narrowly passed the Commission with a vote of 22-21, with 10 abstentions.

Other international governing bodies, such as the European Union, have taken action against Cuba in light of the unjust March 2003 mass incarceration. Last year, the European Union’s member states imposed stern measures against Cuba, including suspending high-level diplomatic visits, reviewing the value of cultural and other exchanges, and inviting dissident activists to diplomatic events as a clarion call to Fidel Castro to end the dissidents’ imprisonment.

The actions of the Cuban government, by way of Fidel Castro’s orders, are an affront to Articles 9 and 19 of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which declare that, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression,” and that, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.” It is particularly interesting that Cuba was a signatory in the adoption of this declaration in 1948.

The list of Cuban detainees published by Amnesty International in their “Essential Measures” brief of 2003 reveals some striking information. Among the detained are 23

people over the age of fifty, as well as 5 others who are more than sixty years of age. I wonder what dissenting activities they were engaging in that would earn them a collective 1,242 years in prison. These peaceful pro-democracy advocates, whom Mr. Castro likes to call dissidents or “enemies of the revolution,” were convicted for activities such as: attending an assembly to promote civil society, possessing membership in the Committee on Cuban Human Rights, or publishing documents to be disseminated abroad that represent a clear means of implementing the measures established in Article IV of *LIBERTAD*, also known as the Helms-Burton Act, which would increase the United States sanctions and blockades against Cuba.

I believe that although Cuba’s transition from the Castro regime to a democratic society with a free economy and basic human rights will be a challenging process, it is an attainable endeavor. We can improve human rights and freedom within Cuba by fostering dramatic reform of the Cuban people’s values.

The United States government, along with Non-Governmental Organizations (also known as NGOs) has been working towards a free and democratic Cuba. In October 2003, President George W. Bush announced the creation of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. After several months of meetings, the Commission published their initial findings. The report, published in May 2004, gives a six-fold strategy for Cuba’s liberation and development, including: the empowerment of Cuban civil society, the denial of resources to the Cuban Dictatorship, and the encouragement of international diplomatic efforts to support Cuban civil society and challenge Castro’s regime.

To better address these issues, the Subcommittee has the pleasure of receiving testimony from the Honorable Michael Kozak, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to further discuss the new United States policy on Cuba. Ambassador Kozak, has had the opportunity to live in Cuba, and as such, is able to provide us with a personal account of the current state of affairs there. In addition, the Subcommittee will hear from the Honorable David Mutchler, Senior Advisor on Cuba for the United States Agency for International Development. He will discuss the current Federal Government interaction and monitoring of human rights violations in Cuba.

NGOs have played an instrumental role in gathering information that has been useful in learning more about this closed country's human rights violations. To give further details on these most-important issues, the Subcommittee will also receive testimony from Eric Olson, Advocacy Director for the Americas with Amnesty International; and Omar Lopez Montenegro from the Cuban American National Foundation. These gentlemen will shed new light upon and explain in greater detail the severity and specifics of human rights violations in present-day Cuba.

Because Cuba is one of the last remaining totalitarian Communist regimes in modern day society, many academics have researched the current human rights situation and itemized methods by which democracy can be attained within Cuba. At the forefront of this endeavor is the Cuba Transition project at the University of Miami. Today, the

Subcommittee also has the honor of hearing from Jaime Suchlicki, the Director of this program. Mr. Suchlicki will speak on the implications and strategies involved in ushering in a representative government for Cuba.

In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization awarded Raul Rivero, a journalist and poet imprisoned in the crackdown, the coveted Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize after his arrest. The Subcommittee has the pleasure of receiving testimony from Mr. Rivero's stepson, Miguel Reyes, who will give us his personal perspective on the impact the dissident imprisonment has had on Cuban nationals and their families.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for coming to speak on these ever-important human rights concerns. In addition, I look forward to hearing about the Bush Administration's efforts to help Cubans free themselves from the shackles of Castro's brutal regime so that they may finally take their rightful place as a bastion of liberty and democracy in our hemisphere.