

**Continuing Human Rights Abuses in Cuba**

**Testimony by**

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the human rights situation in Cuba. It has been more than a year since the Cuban Government arrested 75 individuals peacefully working for democratic change. The Committee's continuing interest in the situation in Cuba is both well timed and welcome. It affords us an opportunity to show our support for the growing demand by Cuban citizens themselves for the blessings of self-determination and democracy.

The Castro Government has long waged war on the basic human rights of its people. It controls all aspects of daily life through an elaborate and pervasive system of undercover agents, informers and neighborhood committees working to detect and suppress dissent and impose ideological conformity. Spouses are encouraged to report on each other, and children on their parents. Independent voices have been arrested on charges as vague as “dangerousness” or as clearly political as “disrespect for authority.” Dissidents are routinely and falsely labeled foreign spies, mercenaries, and agents of the United States. Access to

information is tightly controlled, including access to the Internet, and publications such as the Boston Globe are labeled “enemy propaganda,” the possession of which is a criminal offense.

The 75 arrested in March 2003 are serving sentences averaging 20 years each for such “subversive” activities as association with international human rights and humanitarian NGOs. Omar Rodriguez Saludes was sentenced to 27 years for disseminating a photograph of Cuban poverty. Raul Rivera received 20 years for unspecified “subversive activities.” Owning a chair that a U.S. diplomat once sat in was cited as evidence against Rivera to justify this charge. Conditions of incarceration for these prisoners remain harsh. Many of the older detainees suffer from increasingly poor health. My friend Marta Beatriz Roque spent three and a half years in prison in the late 1990s for the crime of “peaceful” sedition. This “crime” is defined as anything that “perturbs” the socialist order. In Marta’s case that involved taking the Communist Party up on its request for public comments on a draft five-year plan. Marta was out for four years, and then returned to jail with a 20-year sentence last year. Her health has been poor throughout her

ordeals and she remains in a military hospital. Oscar Espinosa Chepe has been returned to a very small shared cell after an extended hospitalization. Raul Rivero – whom I was honored to meet on many occasions during my years in Cuba -- earlier this year was awarded the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Award. However, this accomplished poet and journalist was not able to pick up his prize and enjoy what should have been one of the highlights of his professional career. He too is serving a 20-year sentence in a Cuban jail. Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet has worked tirelessly to put Dr. Martin Luther King's philosophy of non-violence into practice. I visited him in 1999 when he was on a 40-day fast – one day for each year of “the Revolution.” Dr. Biscet was arrested in December 2002 for attempting to teach others about international human rights practices. Three other people who had been arrested with Dr. Biscet were convicted in May of this year for the "crime" of studying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at a private home in Havana.

Unfortunately, such flagrant abuse of human rights has not been limited to the group of 75. Francisco Chaviano, an advocate of peaceful

democratic reforms, was sentenced in 1994 to 15 years in prison for revealing that his organization had been infiltrated by a government agent.

Many of these prisoners of conscience -- falsely accused, summarily tried, and sentenced to long terms in prison -- are subjected to treatment usually reserved for the most dangerous violent offenders. Most are allowed to see their families only briefly, once every three months. For many, their only real hope of release is to accept exile from the country they love and for which they have sacrificed so much.

Small wonder, then, if the families of political prisoners -- and those other men and women dedicated to peaceful change who are still outside prison walls -- live in justifiable fear of imminent arrest.

But despite this very real danger, Cubans are clearly losing their fear of the dying regime and are demanding a role in building their own democratic future. An authentically independent civil society -- the building blocks of a real democracy -- is developing before our eyes. The Varela Project is a peaceful call for a national referendum on political and economic reforms in Cuba that seeks to take advantage of a

clause in the Castro constitution that requires the national assembly to consider a referendum upon the petition of 10,000 citizens. The regime obviously never thought that such a provision could be used against it, but it happened. Over 11,000 signatures were collected from ordinary Cuban citizens in 2002 and presented to the National Assembly. This showed incredible courage on the part of those who signed and registered their identification numbers. The response from the regime was to arrest over 20 of the organizers and to sentence them to long prison terms. But instead of capitulating to this pressure, civil society leader Oswaldo Paya and his colleagues reconstituted their effort and collected and delivered an additional 14,000 signatures. These thousands of Cuban citizens cannot be dismissed by the government as an insignificant, miniscule group of misfits. Vladimiro Roca, the son of one of the founders of the Cuban Communist Party, was jailed along with Marta Beatriz Roque, Felix Bonne, and Rene Gomez Manzano in 1997. Vladimiro himself did over 5 years in prison yet continues his work. We admire and applaud these valiant and principled efforts to promote peaceful and positive changes in Cuba despite active hostility

from the Castro government. And we welcome the growing optimism in Cuba itself that the end of the dictatorship is near.

A peaceful, orderly transition in Cuba is not only right; it serves U.S. interests in the stability of our own region. But what, in such a hostile environment, can the United States really do to support the dreams of these independent defenders of fundamental rights and liberties and to promote a free and prosperous Cuba? When the Cuban Government digs tunnels and puts its army and people on a "war footing" in response to a non-existent U.S. invasion and hunts imaginary spies in a real but peaceful opposition; when principled expressions of concern by the European Union, Honduras, Peru, and Mexico, and other democratic governments result in strident denunciations and retaliatory threats and insults from the Cuban government; when the regime works aggressively to limit and redirect the flow of humanitarian assistance and information, how can we or anyone in the international community extend a helping hand to the beleaguered people of Cuba?

It isn't easy, but it must be done.

Much of what we do is to provide moral support. Those of us who have served in Eastern Europe know how important it is for those suffering under a totalitarian system to know that others know and care about what is happening to them. We also know how much regimes of this nature crave international recognition and respect to provide them the legitimacy they have failed to earn from their own people. So we work with other democracies to condemn the repression and encourage support for real reform.

Since last June, the EU is for the first time inviting dissidents to its official receptions in Havana, much to the anger of the Cuban Government. Individual EU Governments are reviewing their assistance to the regime, with Italy suspending bilateral cooperation and France redirecting its assistance away from the government and to the Cuban people themselves.

We continue our unceasing efforts in international fora such as the UN Commission for Human Rights. Last April the UNCHR passed, by a single vote, a resolution tabled by Honduras that called once again upon Cuba to implement the human rights obligations that it has freely

accepted. Secretary of State Powell and other high-level State Department officials were involved on a daily basis in our efforts to support Honduras and the 34 co-sponsors of the resolution. President Bush and Dr. Rice made personal interventions with foreign counterparts. Several members of Congress also played important roles in shoring up support. For those efforts we are deeply appreciative.

As those of you who have been involved in these efforts know, we offer neither rewards nor threats. Rather, we appeal to the highest principles of our fellow CHR members, three fifths of whom represent democratically elected governments. So one might ask why so much effort is required to get a resolution passed. The answer is that the Cubans do what they falsely accuse us of. They cannot credibly argue that they are in compliance with their human rights commitments. So instead, they threaten other voting members with domestic discord and withdrawal of medical workers if they vote to urge Cuba to fulfill those commitments. They run campaigns accusing the other governments and individual leaders of giving in to U.S. pressure, or worse. Despite these Cuban tactics, Honduras, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic,

Guatemala, Peru, Chile and Mexico all took courageous stances in support of human rights in Cuba by tabling, cosponsoring and/or supporting the resolution. By the same token, we were disappointed that countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay – whose own democratic transitions were assisted by international support – chose to abstain rather than to take a position in favor of observance of human rights. Especially disappointing is that South Africa – which during its struggle against the apartheid regime was the original beneficiary of Item Nine resolutions in the Commission – took a leadership role in pressing other African delegations to vote with the Cubans.

In addition to showing our moral and political support for those courageous Cubans struggling for democracy, our policy is also designed to actively encourage a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. There is no reason that the Cuban people should not enjoy the freedoms and prosperity that now exist in Central Europe, South Africa, Central and South America and other places around the world that once languished under totalitarian or authoritarian dictatorships. To this end, President Bush in October 2003 created the Commission for Assistance

to a Free Cuba (CAFC). The Commission's task was to develop a proactive, integrated and disciplined approach on how the United States can work to hasten a peaceful transition to democracy – particularly through breaking the regime's information blockade. The Commission was also charged with developing contingency plans to assist a free Cuba during such a transition, should its citizens request such assistance.

I would emphasize that we do not seek to dictate the terms of transition: Cuba's future must be decided by the Cuban people. Rather, we look for ways in which we can cooperate as friends with a newly free Cuba.

The Commission report proposes a wide range of actions that the U.S. Government would be prepared to undertake, should a Cuban transition government so request. This would include assistance:

- to meet critical humanitarian and other important needs early in the transition and to initiate the reactivation of the economy;
- to help build essential democratic institutions, both in the government and civil society;

- to help establish reforms necessary to stimulate the domestic private sector and lay the basis for economic recovery; and
- to address the degradation of its infrastructure and environment, which, as in other countries freed from communism, have seen serious deterioration in the areas of water and sanitation, power, and telecommunications.

In addition, the Commission report proposed additional ways to empower independent Cuban civil society through material assistance and training, including increasing assistance up to \$41 million over two years. The Commission recommended steps to expand outreach and expedite the processing of related license applications to religious organizations. These organizations represent the fastest growing and strongest alternatives to the Cuban state in providing basic services and information to the Cuban people.

The fundamental goal of any U.S. assistance to a free Cuba must be to empower and respect the sovereign rights of the Cuban people. Empowering them will mean improving their economic and social well-

being, helping them reconstruct a democratic civic culture through education and institution-building, and supporting them as they transform themselves and Cuban society.

President Bush and Secretary Powell, who chaired the Commission, have repeatedly called for an end to the repression in Cuba. They have insisted that Cubans who seek peaceful change – and basic human rights and freedoms – be permitted to do so. Their call – and that of the U.S. Congress -- has been echoed by many others: by representatives of the European Union, by the leaders of democratic governments in Latin America, the U.N. Commission for Human Rights, and other prominent figures across the world. We must continue to support the efforts of those working for a better Cuba, wherever and whenever we can, whether through our outreach to ordinary Cubans or in partnership with like-minded members of the international community.

I would like to conclude by stressing that promotion of democracy is and will continue to be a central, defining element of our foreign policy. We will continue to use all available bilateral and multilateral

tools at our disposal to combat threats to democracy and to institutionalize democratic reforms toward a stable Western Hemisphere.

Thank you, again, for holding this hearing.