

Statement by Omar Lopez Montenegro, trustee of the *Cuban American National Foundation*

To the Subcommittee on Human Rights in Cuba, Committee on Government Reform  
June 16, 2004

Mr. Chairman

Distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

I want to thank you first for giving me the opportunity to be here, testifying about what is like to be living in fear in the country where I was born and raised, Cuba. When I started in the human rights movement inside Cuba 16 years ago, this was one of my dreams, to be here one day to speak on behalf of my brothers and sisters still living in Cuba.

Thank God I am able to fulfill this part of my dream, but unfortunately, there are a lot of people in Cuba for whom freedom of speech it's still a goal, and aspiration, or a cause worth fighting for. In a country where people can be sentenced to 28 years in prison for speaking out their minds, fear is not a feeling to cope with from time to time, but a permanent condition and an effective tool of repression used to stay in power by the most repressive system our hemisphere has endured. It instills fear because it lacks the ability to inspire hope

This statement can be measured in figures, and also by the evaluations made by the most prestigious human rights institutions around the world. The Cuban regime holds a very objectionable record in this matter, which includes, among other statistics, the following:

- The highest number of prisoners of conscience in the world (84), recorded by Amnesty International.
- The highest number of inmates per capita, 888 for every 100,000 inhabitants, registered by the Center for Prison Studies.
- Second place in the list of the ten worst places to be a journalist, compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists.
- One of the Ten most repressive regimes in the World, appearing in the Worst of the Worst report by Freedom House.
- Second from last (165 place among 166 countries) on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders.
- 153 place among 156 countries (listed under the repressed category) on the Index of Economic Freedom prepared by the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation.

The facts speak for themselves. They tell the story of a society with no options, or to say it in the regime's own words, with only two options: Socialism or Death. That was the message the dictatorship tried to send with the March 2003 crackdown, when 75 activists were sent to prison because they challenged the system by standing up for their rights as individuals. The regime was afraid because they challenged the culture of fear, opening spaces and creating new options against the will of the government. In Cuba, living in

fear does not only mean people being afraid of the government, but also the government being afraid of those who do not fear anymore, or at least are capable of moving beyond fear.

And that's the story to be stressed out in Cuba, how more and more people are showing they can overcome fear and move ahead for a better future. Just six months after the March crackdown, 14,000 new signatures were presented to the National Assembly in support of the Varela Project, an initiative asking for freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of enterprise for all Cubans. More than a year after the crackdown, the Santa Rita Mothers, a group of mothers, wives, and relatives of political prisoners march every Sunday in the streets of Havana, dressed in white, portraying buttons with the pictures of their relatives in prison. Last May 9, on Mother's Day, they gathered in a public park and read out loud the names of more than 300 political prisoners in Cuba.

That's citizenship in motion, looking for ways to make their voices heard inside a repressive society. But they cannot do it alone, they need our help and support in practical and effective ways. We need to increase the aid the civil society in Cuba, and to make sure that this aid gets to the Island, to the hands of the most needy, those who are facing repression. In this sense, some practical ideas can be:

- Sending paper, pens, food, clothing and medicines, to help them satisfy their needs and create dissident networks.
- Sending laptops, cellular devices and other advanced communication technology to overcome the regime's efforts to divide and silence those dissident networks.
- Radio and TV Marti needs to be heard and seen in Cuba. We must effort to ensure that the Cuban people have access to uncensored news and information.

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Fear is always fueled by mistrust and isolation, the feeling of being alone facing a gigantic and overpowering enemy. The regime knows that, and that is why they make every conceivable effort to divide and atomize the internal and external opposition. I remember that in those early days, when not many people knew about the so called dissident movement, every time I was detained and questioned by officers of the political police they always said that they can kill me and nobody would know about it, because nobody really cares.

That wasn't true then, and that isn't true now. But we need to show it, to remove the base of that culture of fear which still traps a large part of the Cuban population. Nobel Peace Prize Winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's best known human rights leader, once said: "The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear".

If we want to free the Cuban people, we must help them to stop living in fear, and provide them ways to start overcoming fear.