

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing
on
“The Communist Cuban Regime’s Disregard for Human Rights”
December 11, 2024 - 2:00 p.m.
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Juan Pappier
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Mr. Chairman, Committee members:

Thank you for the invitation to appear before this Subcommittee to discuss the dismal human rights situation in Cuba.

The Cuban government continues to repress and punish virtually all forms of dissent and public criticism.

Prisoners Defenders, a rights group, reports that 919 political prisoners remain behind bars in Cuba and 229 others are under house arrest or other restrictions on liberty. According to Colectivo 11J, over 500 people who were arrested in connection with the landmark July 11, 2021, demonstrations remain in prison.

Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 170 people detained during the 2021 protests, their relatives and lawyers. We also reviewed case files, verified videos and photos, and obtained forensic evidence.

We documented dozens of cases of arbitrary arrests. Detainees have been held incommunicado for weeks, and sometimes months. Some are beaten, tortured, or subjected to ill-treatment, including sleep deprivation.

Prosecutors continue to frame actions such as protesting peacefully as criminal behavior. Many protesters have been prosecuted for “sedition” and sentenced to disproportionate prison terms of up to 25 years. People are convicted on unreliable or uncorroborated evidence, such as statements solely from security officers, or alleged “odor traces” of the defendants found on rocks.

I’d like to draw this Subcommittee’s attention to some specific cases:

- José Daniel Ferrer, the leader of the unrecognized political opposition party UNPACU, who remains in jail since July 11, 2021. His family has reported he suffers severe health problems and has been repeatedly beaten.
- Artists Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel Castillo, who remain in jail since July and May 2021, respectively. They have been sentenced for participating in protests, and publishing a meme, among other alleged “crimes.”
- Ibrahim Domínguez Aguilar, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for urging other protesters to take to the streets in Contramaestre. He remains in jail at the Boniato prison in Santiago de Cuba. His family has reported that he has been severely beaten.
- 32-year-old Luis Robles who was sentenced to 5 years in prison for protesting with a sign saying “Freedom. No More repression.” He is being held in La Lima prison in Havana.

Cuban authorities have also passed legislation to dismantle the limited civic space that allowed the 2021 protests to occur. These include a new criminal code, and abusive regulations on telecommunications, and social communications.

In addition to political repression, Cubans endure a severe economic crisis. The country has faced three nation-wide electricity blackouts in the last two months and people suffer frequent blackouts, in some places for up to 20 hours a day.

There are acute shortages of food and medicine. The Cuban government acknowledged in July that they only have regular stock of 30% of the basic medicines in the country.

A recent survey of 1,100 people by the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights found that 7 out of 10 Cubans interviewed skipped one meal per day, and 61% struggle to buy essential elements to survive.

As a result of increased poverty and political repression, Cubans are leaving the country in unprecedented numbers. The Cuban government acknowledges that the country lost 9% of the population between 2020 and 2023 to immigration. Independent reports indicate the total figure may be much higher.

Mr. Chair, the human rights situation in Cuba is dismal and the longstanding US policy of isolation has done nothing to improve it.

Rather, the US policy has been counterproductive. The embargo and the State Sponsor of Terrorism Determination have provided the Cuban government with an alleged excuse for its problems, a supposed pretext for its abuses, and a way to garner sympathy abroad with governments that might otherwise have been willing to condemn the country’s repressive practices more vocally.

Any additional general sanctions on Cuba are likely to harm the population—which is already suffering severe deprivations—and to drive even larger migration flows.

Instead, we urge this Congress to take steps towards a new approach that progressively replaces the embargo with targeted sanctions against officials responsible for human rights violations, focuses on garnering support from governments in Latin America and Europe to push multilaterally and in a coordinated manner for human rights in Cuba, and prioritizes empowering Cuban civil society.

Thank you.