



M.A.R. POR CUBA

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs

"Deplorable Human Rights Violations in Cuba and Venezuela"

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Honorable Chairman Duncan and members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak before you about the ongoing systematic violations of human rights in Cuba.

Political scientists today say that the dynastic communist dictatorship that rules Cuba has changed, although the truth is that the island remains a tightly controlled totalitarian state with a single-party system where there is no rule of law, no separation of powers, the Executive controls the legislature and the courts; where citizens are denied fundamental human rights and civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly and association; and where workers' and labor right do not exist, there are no independent labor unions, no right to strike, no collective bargaining.

Into that undeniable reality entered President Obama when he began negotiating normalization of relations with Dictator Raúl Castro more than two years ago –a secret negotiation that brought about his new U.S.-Cuba policy announced on December 17th of last year.

Almost a year later, the situation on the ground clearly shows that the Obama Administration made many concessions not merited by the facts, such as:

- Returning to Cuba several Cuban spies that were serving time in American prisons, one of whom had been sentenced to two consecutive life terms; one for his role in the shoot-down by Cuban Migs in international airspace of two civilian defenseless Brothers to the Rescue planes conducting a humanitarian search and rescue flight to save lives in the Straits of Florida, which resulted in the premeditated murders of three American citizens and one U.S. resident: Carlos Costa, Armando Alejandro, Jr., Mario de la Peña and Pablo Morales, young men full of dreams that were left unfulfilled as the Castro's perpetrated one of the most horrendous crimes in the long list of crimes committed by the regime throughout its 56 years in power with total impunity. Armando Alejandro, Jr. had voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Army and served two terms of duty in Viet Nam. The individual who ordered the shoot-down was none other than Cuba's Minister of the Armed Forces at the time, General Raúl Castro. I was on board the third and only plane that made it back to base on that fateful day of February 24, 1996; and,

- Pulling Cuba out of the list of governments that support international terrorism, while several dozen fugitives wanted by the FBI are welcomed in the island. To this day, an American terrorist who killed a New Jersey State Trooper in cold blood, was sentenced to life in prison, escaped, and went to live in Cuba, remains among the FBI's ten most wanted. The FBI continues to offer a million dollars for information leading to her capture.

Regrettably, it seems that not all American lives have the same value.

In regards to human rights in Cuba, almost a year after the presidential announcement, the results are in:

- In April 2015, President Obama and Raúl Castro met at the VII Summit of the Americas in Panama. They shook hands and pronounced a joint statement the next day, while Cuban officials and state security agents demonstrated the true criminal nature of the regime by conducting violent acts of harassment and repudiation to undermine events of the Summit to which Cuba's and Venezuela's independent civil society representatives had been invited to participate and speak on behalf of its peoples.

I was part of the delegation of the Assembly of the Cuban Resistance in Panama which was victim of a brutal violent assault by a group of the regime's 'diplomats' and state security agents, who stormed out of the Cuban Embassy located in the vicinity of the Parque Porras of said city while our group placed a wreath at the statue of Cuban Apostle of Independence, Jose Martí on April 8th. One of the repressors was Alexis Frutos Weeden, a top ranking intelligence agent for the Castro regime who was subsequently identified as leading repressive activities in Venezuela.

The attack –caught on film and reported by the news media- was of such violent nature that many of the activists needed emergency medical treatment. The pro-democracy delegation was detained by Panamanian police authorities for over eight hours before being released, threatened with deportation and advised that they would have to go stand trial before a “night judge”, while Castro's thugs enjoyed total impunity. Officials from the U.S. Embassy in Panamá finally showed up at the detention center many hours later just as we were being released close to midnight.

Two days after, we had the opportunity to meet with a House delegation which included this Sub-Committee's Chairman, Jeff Duncan (R-SC), who expressed his concern, heard our testimonies and made the following statement at the time, and I quote: ***"The unrelenting and merciless oppression of the Cuban people by a regime hostile to liberty is a direct rejection of the values we as Americans hold as sacred. No regime should be rewarded for such appalling acts. There is no cause dearer to Americans than the cause of freedom. The Cuban people have not forgotten the oppression they face daily, and we will not forget about them"***, end of quote.

That a well known agent of the intelligence apparatus of the Castro dictatorship – responsible for directing violent repression against young Venezuelan students- was there directly involved in the Parque Porras assault of our delegation, does not bode well for human rights in our Hemisphere. That this was allowed to happen in a free country within a Summit that purports to uphold democratic values is simply unacceptable.

- Prior to and during Pope Francis' recent visit to the island, the Castro's regime unleashed a violent wave of political and social repression with over 350 detentions of peaceful activists in order to impede their participation in the Pope's public events. Three Cubans who attempted to hand a letter to Pope Francis denouncing the situation in the island as his motorcade was heading to the site in which he would celebrate Mass in Havana, were immediately arrested and have been kept incommunicado ever since, without having been brought before a court.
- The Ladies in White, a group of mothers, wives and relatives of political prisoners who go to mass every Sunday dressed in white to carry out a peaceful demonstration calling for the release of all political prisoners, are beaten by the police and state security agents dressed as civilians, dragged on the streets, and taken to prison. In spite of this, they have marched, together with members of the Forum for Human Rights and Liberties, Front of Civic Resistance, Patriotic Union of Cuba and other courageous leaders of the pro-democracy movement for 28 consecutive Sundays as part of the "Todos Marchamos" (We all March) campaign which calls for an unconditional political amnesty for all political prisoners. This past Sunday alone, approximately 70 activists and Ladies in White were detained in Havana and around 80 in the oriental region of the island.
- There has been a significant increase in repression and in the number of arbitrary political detentions, beatings and abuse. According to various sources and human rights' organizations in the island, more than 880 politically motivated detentions were registered for the month of September; violent physical aggressions against peaceful activists by police and state security agents increased as well, with reports of 93 verified cases vs. 21 cases in the preceding month and numerous acts of repression, house arrests and extrajudicial measures to prohibit freedom of movement were reported as well. October was even worse, with 1093 arbitrary detentions for political motives accounted for and significant deterioration of inhuman conditions within the island's prisons. The first day of November alone registered over 150 arrests of pro-democracy activists.
- Prominent members of the civic resistance movement in Cuba have died under highly "suspicious" extrajudicial and sudden circumstances. International transparent investigations that seek truth and justice have eluded the families of human rights activists and pro-democracy leaders such as Miguel Valdés Tamayo; Orlando Zapata Tamayo; Daisy de las Mercedes Talavera López; Juan Wilfredo Soto García; Laura Pollán Toledo; Wilman Villar Mendoza; Oswaldo Payá Sardinás and Harold Cepero, to name a few of the most recent cases.

In conclusion, the President's Cuba policy –negotiated in secret without the participation of any legitimate representative of the Cuban people- has emboldened and enabled the regime, which remains defiant and continues to maintain its oppressive yoke upon the Cuban people, while misleading the international and business community with false expectations in order to generate the resources it desperately needs to stay in power. Nothing has changed in Cuba under Castro's dictatorship that warrants unilateral concessions on the part of the United States. Human rights continue to be systematically violated. Fundamental freedoms continue to be denied. Thus, it is not U.S. policy that needs to change, but the Castro regime.

Until human rights and fundamental freedoms are restored, all political prisoners are unconditionally released, all laws against fundamental liberties are repealed, political parties are legalized and there are free, multiparty elections in Cuba, the United States should stand united in solidarity with the Cuban people. Embracing a dictatorship in Cuba bodes ill for the aspirations for democracy and freedom of peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere and Cuba.

As Chairman Duncan so aptly stated, "the unrelenting and merciless oppression of the Cuban people by a regime hostile to liberty is a direct rejection of the values we as Americans hold as sacred".

Thank-you.