

Testimony of Enrique Roig
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
before the
House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere Subcommittee
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Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our support for human rights in Cuba, a key Biden-Harris administration priority.

Lamentably, the human rights situation in Cuba remains abysmal. The repressive environment, combined with a disastrous economy, has prompted a mass exodus from the island, including of youth activists and human rights defenders.

The efforts of the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) to promote human rights in Cuba includes over \$6 million in foreign assistance programs annually. Our initiatives incorporate human rights documentation and advocacy, including those related to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. We also support documentation of labor rights violations and advocacy targeting international labor bodies and labor union confederations. Our implementers strengthen fact-based reporting and the professionalism of independent media, and our efforts have increased access to information, including by assisting in circumventing Internet censorship on-island.

Recently, I met with a range of civil society actors in Miami, who are deeply engaged on many issues relating to Cuba. Two issues came up repeatedly, which I know are of concern to this Sub-committee: first, the plight of unjustly detained political prisoners, and second, Cuban workers, including medical professionals, who may be the victims of human trafficking and exploitation through Cuba's labor export program. I would therefore like to discuss each of these topics in greater detail.

Civil society estimates there are approximately 1,000 unjustly detained political prisoners in Cuba. Reports describe how they are subjected to mistreatment, including where it involves isolation, denial of visits by family members, and lack of access to health care. Political prisoners have also reported that fellow inmates, acting on orders from or with the permission of prison authorities, beat,

threatened, intimidated, and harassed them. To call attention to their plight, many political prisoners have engaged in hunger strikes.

Our campaign to free unjustly detained political prisoners, #WithoutJustCause, highlighted two Cuban prisoners: Maykel “Osorbo” Castillo and Jose Daniel Ferrer. Unfortunately, they remain behind bars, so we continue to advocate bilaterally for their release.

We also highlight the political prisoner problem in multilateral contexts. For example, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols and I participated in a September 19 roundtable, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, that shed light on the plight of unjustly detained political prisoners.

Department programming supports civil society-led advocacy in international fora. For example, under a Department program, details on nearly 1,000 individual cases of human rights violations were submitted to international human rights bodies. Programs support groups to engage with the UN Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions, and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, among others. The Department also supported organizations who drafted and submitted shadow reports to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2023 Cuba Universal Periodic Review. The reports covered political prisoners, politically and religiously motivated repression, torture, gender-based violence, sedition cases, and labor rights.

To further promote accountability, in July 2022 the Department took steps to impose visa restrictions on 28 Cuban officials who had enabled unjust detentions and sham trials of hundreds of peaceful protestors who are now political prisoners.

Let me now turn to trafficking in persons. Cuba’s labor export program, which includes medical missions, is particularly concerning. Through this program, the Cuban government sends tens of thousands of workers around the globe under multi-year cooperative agreements negotiated with receiving countries. Workers have reported having their passports confiscated and their movements restricted by the Cuban government. They work long hours, often under

dangerous or degrading conditions, and are surveilled, threatened, and in some cases even sexually harassed. Workers reportedly receive only five to 25 percent of their salary, with salaries retained in bank accounts they do not fully control, and seized by the Cuban government if they leave the program. Exploitation of the workers in the labor export program includes banning those who flee it from returning to Cuba for up to eight years.

To confront this degrading practice, the Department has increased bilateral engagement with countries hosting Cuban workers to promote awareness of Cuba's exploitative practices and urge countries to uphold their international obligations, follow best labor and human rights practices, and protect trafficking victims. The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons has prioritized this issue, and in September its ambassador Cindy Dyer traveled to Miami to engage with civil society actors and hear directly from survivors.

As you can see Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, we take the issue of human rights in Cuba seriously and look to address it at every turn. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions and to working with the Committee in the future.