

## Berta Soler Testimony, English Translation

Honorable Christopher H. Smith, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations.

This testimony is being delivered in English by Orlando Gutierrez-Boronat

Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Above all, I want to thank you for listening to me and also to thank all of the people and organizations who have made it possible for me to testify on the human rights situation in my country, Cuba. We are presently living through a particularly defining moment for the future of our country in the wake of the recent announced reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States.

I am appearing here as the leader of the Ladies in White, a group of women activists who support change towards democracy in our country through non-violent means, inspired by the example of women such as Rosa Parks and Coretta King, among others, who with courage and determination blazed paths for the full enjoyment of civil rights in this country. Now 50 years after the events in Selma, Alabama, and testifying before a Subcommittee whose mandate includes Global Human Rights, it is a great honor and an historic opportunity for me to appear before you.

I also speak on behalf of numerous leaders and activists from Cuban civil society who have entrusted me with speaking for them before you. It is a civil society that is particularly repressed by the intolerance of a government whose exercise of power consists of the systematic violation of the human rights of the Cuban people. Just before I left Cuba to be here, last January 28th, the day we celebrate the birth of our Founding Father José Martí, dozens of activists were arrested in Havana and other provinces for attempting to place offerings of flowers at statues of José Martí. In its totalitarian vision, the dictatorship seeks a monopoly on our national identity through the use of force against all independent activists.

The most respected international human rights organizations have documented violations of human rights in Cuba. On October 23, 2013, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued an injunction on behalf of members of the Ladies in White, to afford protection in the face of systematic repression by Cuban authorities. I submit the official Precautionary Measure issued by the Commission for these purposes, as well as the report submitted to the Commission by the Association of Independent Cuban lawyers (Cubalex) which initiated the case before the Commission. I wish also to submit a report prepared by Cubalex on Cuba's prison system. I request that these reports be made a part of the record of this hearing as documentary evidence for our testimony.

These documents demonstrate that the subject of political prisoners, one of the most sensitive issues in Cuba today, reaches far beyond the occasional or periodic release of some of them. Resolving this matter requires the unconditional freeing of everyone who has been jailed for political reasons on the island and the elimination of all legal restrictions used to repress those who think differently from the regime.

Cuba continues to be a country with a one-party government where fundamental freedoms that are an absolute right in North American society are crimes against what they regard as "State Security."

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Separation of powers does not exist in Cuba, freedom of expression and association continue to be repressed and the Constitution establishes the Community Party as the “driving force” for society. The right to strike is regarded as a crime with workers on and off the island subject to conditions of labor slavery which have been denounced by international organizations. While these conditions prevail, it is not possible to speak of a willingness to change on the part of the Castroite regime.

That same January 28th, during his appearance before the third Summit of the [Community of Latin American and Caribbean States] (CELAC), held in San Jose, Costa Rica, the dictator Raul Castro stated that [Cuba] “...will not give up one millimeter...” of its system of government as negotiations between Cuba and the United States begin, and that it would make no sense to demand that he make changes to a military, dynastic dictatorship that has been in power for more than half a century. For us, this signals the continuation of beatings, jailing, forced exile, discrimination against our children at school, and all manner of patterns of intimidation and abuse we suffer daily for wanting to see a pluralistic, democratic, and inclusive Cuba.

Honorable Mr. Chairman,

Honorable Members of the Subcommittee,

Our aspirations are legitimate because they are undergirded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Cuba is a party, and the signed international pacts on civil and political rights which have not been ratified by the dictatorship. Our demands are quite concrete: freedom for political prisoners, recognition of civil society, the elimination of all criminal dispositions that penalize freedom of expression and association **and the right of the Cuban people to choose their future through free, multiparty elections.**

We believe these demands are just and valid. Even more importantly, for us they represent the most concrete exercise of politics, a step in the direction of democratic coexistence. Cuba will change when the laws that enable and protect the criminal behavior of the forces of repression and corrupt elements that sustain the regime change.

In the name of those who have been executed.

In the name of Cuban political prisoners.

In the name of the pilots from the humanitarian organization, Brothers to the Rescue, murdered on Fidel Castro’s orders.

In the name of the victims from the “March 13th” tugboat.

In the name of the victims of Cuba’s Communist regime.

Cuba yes, Castro no.

Thank you very much.