

Testimony
Congressman Dan Burton
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

As the former Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee and author of one of the most important pieces of legislation in the Cuba-U.S. relationship, I would like to thank Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Payne, Chairman Mack and Ranking Member Engel, for holding this timely joint hearing today. It is essential that we continue to bring to light the ongoing gross human rights violations and atrocities committed by the Castro regime. The Cuban people, like all of us, deserve basic human rights. I believe that these rights will only come as a result of the removal of the Castro brothers from power and the reinstatement of constitutional democracy.

For the past 53 years, more than eleven million Cuban people have been subject to the iron fists of the Castro brothers. From its inception, this regime has been anti-U.S., repeating a pathetic David and Goliath narrative in order to blame their economic, social and political problems on the United States. This narrative has succeeded thus far and its acceptance serves to solidify the Castro's grip on power. At every turn, the Castro regime has sought to unite with enemies of the United States, no matter how culturally and ideologically different. During the cold war, they allied with the Soviet Union. Now, they are actively engaging Iran.

The resilience of this regime has significantly contributed to the leftward and more undemocratic movement of many Latin American nations. We are seeing populist leftist regimes such as that of Chavez in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua, Correa in Ecuador and Morales of Bolivia rise to power aided and abetted by the Communist Regime in Cuba. These leaders have gone to great lengths to suppress freedoms, censor the opposition and even change their constitutions, in order to maintain their hold on power. I believe that our policy toward Cuba is crucial to the success of our policy towards other nations in the Western Hemisphere.

When we passed the LIBERTAD Act of 1996, known also as Helms-Burton, our goal was to isolate the Castro brothers. I still stand by this law and I agree with the great majority of the Cuban exile community that there will be no change in Cuba while a Castro is in charge. Only after regime change will Cuba's people be truly free.

The argument that the economic embargo hasn't worked and should be done away with is misguided. It can work. Unfortunately the fact is that there is no true embargo on Cuba in place. The U.S. is one of the biggest exporters of food to the island and Cuban-Americans send hundreds of millions of dollars annually back home to their relatives, propping up a black-market for goods and services that the Communist system does not provide - remittances which are highly taxed by the Castro regime. The moment that we started allowing food sales to the Cuban regime and remittances to go through, was the moment the embargo became more of a symbol than a policy tool. The fact that the "embargo" hasn't worked and the regime is all the more autocratic really means that our policies should become more stringent, not less so.

The alternative, that has been supported by many members of this committee, has failed miserably. As a result of open tourism and international investment, the regime has recently

enjoyed a tremendous influx of money from Canadians, Latin Americans, and Europeans who have access to the island. Why haven't these tourists from democratic countries transformed this dictatorship into a democracy? The answer is that the regime barely lets tourists travel outside Veradero Beach or historical landmarks in Havana. It guarantees as little interaction between tourists and locals as possible, though it looks the other way in regards to the thriving sex trade.

This so-called openness has done little if anything to help those whose political and economic freedoms are suppressed. I wish I could tell you that stories like that of Armando Valladares, who was imprisoned in 1960 for 23 years, are no longer being written. He was deemed counter-revolutionary because he refused to display a communist sign on his bank desk. These atrocities are still happening. In March of 2003, while the world was watching the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Cuba experienced a brutal crackdown by the Castro regime to crush the efforts by the Cuban people to achieve a free and democratic Cuba. This "black spring" as it was later called, resulted in the arrest of 75 dissidents, 29 of them journalists, on the charge of "dangerousness." In Cuba, it is entirely lawful to arrest someone if one has suspicion that the individual may be inclined to dissent against the state. This is part of the reason why thousands of Cubans still risk their lives every year to flee the Communist regime by any means necessary, even attempting to brave the hazardous 90-mile crossing between the United States and Cuba on makeshift rafts. The regime denies citizens the right to change their government.

We must continue to send a strong message to the Cuban government that the United States will not forget those people who are languishing in Cuban prisons for the so-called crime of speaking out against the injustices perpetrated by the Castro regime.

I commend the bravery of men like Orlando Zapata Tamayo who died in protest of the ill conditions of the prison system. No prisoner in Cuba has access to the much-touted Cuban universal health care system. In fact, according to the State Department's 2010 report, the prisons are overcrowded, infested with vermin and prisoners are often sick and inadequately treated. Women are denied access to feminine hygiene products and adequate prenatal care as well as being subjected to sexual abuse and violence.

Prisoners who are released from these hellish prisons are most often forced to leave Cuba, their home, as a condition of release. While I celebrate the fact that they are free from prison, I mourn the thought that they have to join the ranks of thousands of Cuban exiles throughout the world, who want nothing more than to return to their home as free citizens, an impossible wish as long as the Castros remain in power.

The Obama Administration needs to be more focused on our neighbor, and to make a concerted effort to produce real results. According to Human Rights Watch, the "divided and even contradictory nature" of policies of Latin America, Canada, Europe and the United States "has allowed the Cuban government to evade effective pressure and deflect criticism of its practices." If Canada, Europe and democracy and freedom loving nations of Latin America would join us in the economic embargo, we might see a different Cuba. The solution is not appeasement.

I have hope there will be a day when the light of democracy shines in Havana, a day when free expression and free elections replace the current hopeless status quo. Only then will I will start

talking about changing the Helms-Burton law. I want to see democracy and freedom in Cuba but until that happens we must keep the pressure on Fidel and Raul.

I am convinced that there will never be true lasting peace and freedom in the region until we solve the Cuba problem once and for all. The only acceptable solution is a free and democratic Cuba.