

**Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Government Reform Committee
Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness**

“Castro’s Cuba: What’s the Proper United States Response to Ongoing Human Rights Violations in Our Hemisphere?”

October 16, 2003

The Subcommittee is convening today to examine the atrocious human rights violations Cubans continue to suffer at the hands of their government, and discuss what the proper United States response should be as a result of these blatant abuses to help usher in a free and democratic Cuba.

Liberty and freedom-loving Cubans have been engaged in a long fight for their island. The quest for democracy began there over a century ago, and unfortunately has yet to come to fruition. For the last 44 years, there has been one person standing in the way of freedom for the Cuban people – the Communist Dictator Fidel Castro.

Since Castro assumed control in Cuba on January 1, 1959, human rights and living conditions there have deteriorated tremendously. Most Cuban people live every day in fear of their government, thousands of which 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.

I have always been critical of the human rights conditions in Cuba. Seeing a need for the United States to do more to promote democracy in Cuba, I introduced the “*Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act*”, (LIBERTAD; Helms-Burton) in February of 1995 to seek international sanctions against the Castro government in response to the horrific human rights conditions at the hands of the Castro regime, as well as to prepare for a democratic Cuban Nation.

One year later, on February 24, 1996, Cuban Air Force fighter planes pursued three Cessna aircrafts operated by the Brothers to the Rescue - volunteer pilots who survey the seas on search and rescue missions to assist Cuban dissidents - deep into international airspace, where they fired upon two of the Brothers to the Rescue planes, murdering all 4 of the passengers on-board.

In response to the Brothers to the Rescue murders, the United States government recognized the need for stronger public policy initiatives to send a message to Fidel Castro that his government's actions against the Cuban people and the Brothers to the Rescue pilots would not be tolerated. Not long after this deplorable act, my legislation, the "*Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act*" (LIBERTAD), won overwhelming support in both the House and the Senate, and was signed into law by former President Clinton on March 12, 1996.

Since the "*Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act*" became law, the Castro government has continued to commit numerous crimes against its people. In March of this year, the Cuban police executed a crackdown of over 75 dissidents who were opposed to the regime, sentencing these peaceful oppositionists and journalists to jail terms ranging from 6 to 28 years for their supposed "crimes". In prison, these dissidents have been savagely beaten and nearly starved to death for merely vocalizing criticisms of the Cuban government.

Seeking to address the current situation in Cuba, last week President Bush announced that his Administration will be undertaking further initiatives to further promote democracy in Cuba. In his remarks, he stated that the United States is going to strengthen the enforcement of current travel restrictions to Cuba, and increase the inspection of travelers and Cuban goods entering the country – which he hopes will stunt the growth of the illicit sex trade, a modern form of slavery that the Castro government has been encouraging. The President also announced the creation of the Commission for the Assistance to a Free Cuba, to plan for Cuba's transition from Stalinist-like dictatorial rule to a free and open society.

The United States isn't the only country taking a firm stance against Castro's regime. The European Union (EU), a group of 15 democratic countries in Europe that are dedicated to promoting peace and freedom in the world, has recently been reassessing their political, cultural, and business ties with Cuba in light of the recent dissident crackdown. The EU is currently rethinking the funding that they have been supplying to Castro's government for economic and social programs – which have helped many of the poor, over 42 percent of Cuba's 11.2 million inhabitants, but which have also helped to prop up the obviously moribund Castro regime.

Facing such scrutiny from concerned Nations around the world, the Cuban government recently barred a special envoy from the United Nations Human Rights Commission from visiting the island to probe human rights conditions, and they continue to deny the International Committee of the Red Cross to examine the conditions in Cuban prisons – these aren't the actions of a country that has nothing to hide.

Not only has the Castro regime stifled efforts to promote freedom and democracy in Cuba, but they have also actively been involved in the promotion of communism and dictatorships around the world. Cuba has actively encouraged other Nations to fall under dictatorial rule. In an August policy report, the Hudson Institute stated that the Cuban government has been providing assistance to the fledgling Chavez regime in Venezuela to turn the current democratic rule in the South American country into a comprehensive system of communist infiltration.

It was also recently concluded that Cuba has been jamming United States commercial and government satellite transmissions directed at Iran in an effort to prevent any notion of democracy in the area. And at this time, both Cuba and Iran are pressuring the United Nations to adopt Internet standards so that their governments can dramatically censor any information sent to their countries, to further shield their people from the rest of the free world.

To gain a greater perspective on the United States' policy initiatives on Cuba, we will hear from the Honorable Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, who will be discussing the ways in which President Bush's Administration plans to strengthen the current sanctions placed on Cuba. Additionally, he will speak as to how the United States government will assist in the creation of a democratic Cuba. In addition, a representative of the United States Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control will be here to explain the current economic sanctions on Cuba, and how the Treasury Department enforces those restrictions.

The Subcommittee will also be receiving testimony from the Honorable Adolfo Franco, Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), who will discuss how the United States has initiated programs that have promoted democracy in Cuba, and the status of these initiatives.

To outline the severity of Human Rights violations in present-day Cuba, representatives of the human rights organizations Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for a Free Cuba will also be here to discuss their involvement in bringing to light the abuses that the Cuban people are suffering at the hands of Castro's government.

Under Fidel Castro's rule, Cuba has become a cesspool of poverty and depression. The Cuban people have been exploited for the last 44 years, and are continuously being kept in the dark by the people whose duty it is to protect them. Now is the time for the United States to take bolder actions against the Castro regime, and to once and for all bring about change and give Cubans what they have been waiting for far too long...freedom!

I look forward to hearing more about the Bush Administration's efforts to help Cubans free themselves from the shackles of Castro and to finally to take their rightful place as a bastion of liberty and democracy in our hemisphere.