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## **‘Human Rights in Cuba: An Opportunity Squandered?’**

*U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)*  
*Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,*  
*Global Human Rights and International Organizations*  
*Chairman’s opening remarks at hearing*  
*February 5, 2015*

Good morning. We are here today to examine the state of human rights in Cuba, which is a very timely topic indeed, given the Obama Administration’s sea change in policy toward Cuba announced at the end of last year.

We are here to ask whether in undertaking this change in policy, the Obama Administration used the considerable leverage that it wields to seek to better the condition of the Cuban people, or whether, as I fear, an opportunity was squandered in its haste to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough and create a legacy for the President.

Thus this hearing is not only about Castro regime accountability, but also Obama Administration accountability, with Congress exercising its role of both oversight and as a bully pulpit for reminding the world that Cuba remains a Communist dictatorship which continues to arrest political dissidents – an estimated 178 in this last month alone – and one whose caudillo, Raul Castro, has declared would not change, even in response to the Obama Administration’s concessions.

This Castro regime continues to harbor fugitives from justice such as Joanne Chesimard, who was convicted in the 1973 murder of a state trooper in my home state of New Jersey, Officer Werner Foerster. Indeed, just yesterday, we had the Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Roberta Jacobson appear before the full Foreign Affairs Committee. I asked her what the response of the Cuban government was when she raised the issue of the return of Joanne Chesimard to justice. She replied that the Cuban government stated that it was “not interested in discussing her return.”

This is unacceptable. I have here in my hands a statement which I ask to be submitted for the record from Christopher J. Burgos, the President of the State Troopers Fraternal Organization of New Jersey, wherein he states on behalf of our Jersey State Troopers that “We are shocked and very disappointed that returning a convicted killer of a State Trooper was not already demanded and accomplished in the context of the steps announced by the White House regarding this despotic dictatorship.”

I also would like to point out as an aside that President Burgos and New Jersey State Police Superintendent Colonel Rick Fuentes both very much had wanted to be here today to present testimony in person, and I look forward to having them here for a follow up hearing on this topic which is very important to the people of my State.

But fortunately, we do have with us three very brave and uniquely qualified witnesses to the brutality of the Cuban dictatorship, three human rights activists who at great personal cost to themselves and their families stood up for human dignity.

We will hear about the deplorable state of human rights in Cuba, how Afro-Cubans in particular face discrimination on a day-to-day basis, and the brutality with which human rights activists, including women, are treated. We will hear of murders sanctioned by the government, of beatings, of arrests and re-arrests.

And I would also like to point out that after testifying here, in public, two of our witnesses will be returning to Cuba. They know that while they may not be arrested upon their return, one day the regime will exact a price against them for their temerity. Yet they insist on appearing here, so that they can share the truth of what is happening in their beloved isle. What bravery!

I therefore would like to dedicate this hearing to the Cuban people, who have suffered for so many decades under the brutal regime of the Castro brothers, and to thank our witnesses for testifying. I also would like to thank in particular my dear friend and colleague, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for her leadership day-in-and-day-out, in good weather and in bad, on behalf of the people of not only Cuba, but in countries such as Venezuela, China and Viet Nam, where the people continue to suffer under oppressive rulers. Thank you, Ileana, for your leadership and moral clarity.

It is thus my belief that there should be no easing of the pressure until Cuba has met definitive and concrete human rights and democratic milestones. Among the milestones are the release of all political prisoners, the end of harassment and a policy of releasing and then re-jailing, the ending of restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, and on the rights of Assembly. Moreover, the Church must be allowed to conduct its affairs fully and freely without government interference.

And, finally, the Castro regime must be held to account for their harboring of some seventy fugitives from justice, including Joanne Chesimard, who is on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list.

To that end, I would like to state that I intend to introduce legislation that will complement our existing legislation on Cuba, in particular Helms-Burton, making sure that important human rights milestones are met before our government makes concessions that are effectively unilateral, squandering leverage. I would like to invite my colleagues to consider joining as co-sponsors.

With that, thank you.