

The Communist Cuban Regime's Disregard for Human Rights

“The Freedom of Cuba is a nonnegotiable demand” – President Ronald Reagan

*Opening Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)
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A special welcome to the distinguished former House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen for her amazing leadership, insight and wisdom in the struggle to protect human rights and liberty throughout the world, including and especially in Cuba.

We are deeply honored that you are here, providing the Congress and the new administration with a path forward.

Thank you

When Armando Valladares was appointed Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights, President Ronald Reagan said: [“I have an impossible mission for you. Try to convince the UN that there are human rights violations in Cuba.”](#)

I travelled with Mr. Valladares to Geneva. He was awe inspiring and got the UN Human Rights Commission to investigate the cruelty of Castro's prisons. I've read his book not once but twice—[Against All Hope A Memoir of Life in Castro's Gulag](#)—a brilliant expose of what he and other political prisoners endured with extraordinary courage, faith and perseverance.

Mr. Valladares said: “I can tell you that the saddest thing was to see the indifference of the world towards the human rights violations in Cuba. That is, when my fellow inmates died being tortured, were murdered, disappeared, the world absolutely ignored it, the world didn't want to listen...”

We are here today to recommit ourselves to the noble struggle by the Cuban people to finally achieve freedom.

For too long, the Cuban people have long suffered under Communism, now under the Presidency of Miguel Diaz-Canel.

90 miles from America's shores resides one of the most repressive and brutal regimes in the world.

90 miles from these shores the Communist Cuban regime remains ensconced in power, terrorizing and abusing the Cuban people.

90 miles from these shores, the Communist Cuban regime remains a threat to the American people and our national security—especially through their deepening partnerships with the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army.

Many still wish to speak of engagement without acknowledging the plain reality of the threat Communist Cuba poses to the United States, the world at large, and most importantly, the Cuban people themselves.

Today, too many people in the free world do not understand the reality of life in Communist Cuba.

In Cuba, political and economic freedoms do not exist.

The Communist Party rules through violence and fear and attempts to control not just the economy but all elements of society.

Civil society lives under heavy surveillance, harassment, and repression.

- It criminalizes all forms of dissent.
- It restricts what kind of jobs Cubans can take.
- It prohibits free movement to and from the island.

Today in Cuba, nearly one thousand innocents are imprisoned for the offence of thinking differently from the official communist party line.

In Cuba, there exists no true private sector—the security state ultimately controls all forms of activity on the island. Every dollar spent by a tourist ultimately benefits the dictatorship. Every instance of American companies or politicians taking trips to Cuba to engage with state entities – such as healthcare providers – legitimizes the communist regime, furthers their policies of human trafficking, terrorism, and violent repression, delaying the arrival of the day when the Cuban people shall be free.

And unlike its close allies Venezuela and Nicaragua—two authoritarian socialist regimes in Latin America—Cuba does not even pretend to hold elections.

This is the fifth hearing I have chaired on human rights in Cuba.

The years may change, but the song remains the same – the Communist Cuban regime holds a blatant disregard for the very concept of human rights, and the United States still requires a consistently firm policy toward Cuba one which is pro-active in promoting human rights and liberty for the Cuban people.

It is time that American politicians – including Members of this House – stop signaling to the Communist regime in Cuba that if they wait long enough, they will be able to redefine their relationship with the US without lifting their boots from the throats of the Cuban people.

At one hearing I chaired in 2015, three human rights activists exposed the true reality of life on the gulag island, at a time when the Obama Administration was preaching “engagement.”

Two months earlier, President Obama had announced his new policy of engagement with Cuba—after many months of secret negotiations with the Communists.

Obama’s push to normalize relations involved a series of unilateral concessions.

His administration reopened the U.S. embassy in Havana, relieved sanctions, and restarted tourist flights from the U.S.—without setting any preconditions for improving the regime’s awful human rights record.

In 2016, Obama even visited the island—the first U.S. President to do so since the Communist Revolution.

In the days before, during, and after his visit, the regime arrested hundreds of protestors. Human rights groups on the island begged Obama “not to let himself be manipulated.”

Instead, he infamously did the “wave” at a Havana baseball game with dictator Raul Castro, after a joint press conference and welcome ceremony alongside the Communist Party Politburo, under a portrait of Che Guevara.

Normalization legitimized Castro’s brutal dictatorship. It made the human rights situation worse, not better. Acts of religious persecution skyrocketed. Repression increased.

The year Obama visited the island, there were nearly 10,000 documented political arrests.

I and many of my colleagues in Congress strongly opposed this naïve and dangerous policy.

I visited with the Cuban Ambassador here in the District of Columbia. I said I wanted to visit the prisons. He told me that the Cuban government will decide who I can see. I asked whether other congressional delegations accepted those terms and conditions. He said yes. I never got the visa.

I along with Illeana Ros-Lehtinen introduced [H.R. 1782, the Cuba Human Rights Act of 2015](#), legislation to prevent a softening in US-Cuba relations without improvements to Cuba’s human rights record.

(I plan to update and reintroduce it at the beginning of the next Congress in January.)

Instead of standing with the Cuban people and demanding an end to their oppression, Obama stretched out a hand to their oppressors, ensuring a lost decade in the fight to promote liberty and human rights for the Cuban people.

Upon taking office, President Trump reversed many of these shortsighted policies which harmed the Cuban people, and rightly so.

The new Administration has before it a fresh opportunity to prioritize the recognition of human rights and the release of political prisoners in its dealings with the Cuban regime, and American allies who freely interact with Cuba without a second thought as to its atrocious human rights record.

Today our expert witnesses will shed light on the regime's human rights abuses, and how the United States government must respond.

We are honored to have with us the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, former Chair of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. My good friend Ileana represented South Florida for 30 years.

In Congress, she was a strong advocate for human rights, especially concerning her native Cuba.

Let me also thank Maria Werlau, who is the Executive Director of the Free Society Project and Cuba Archive. She will discuss extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances in Cuba, and state-sponsored human trafficking, the regime's largest source of foreign income.

Our last witness is Joe Connor, an author and New Jerseyan whose father, Frank Connor, was killed by Cuban-backed terrorists. He will highlight Cuba's long-standing sponsorship of terrorism, how the regime violates the rights of Americans here at home, and the importance of keeping Cuba's designation as a State Sponsor of Terror.

To this day Cuba harbors terrorist fugitives wanted in the U.S.

One of those is Willie Morales, chief bombmaker for the Puerto Rican terror group Armed Forces of National Liberation, which Cuba supported with money,

material, and training. Morales built the bomb that killed Frank Connor and three others in Fraunces Tavern in New York in 1975. Morales later escaped his hospital prison cell and fled to Cuba.

Joanne Chesimard, A.K.A. Assata Shakur, is also hiding in Cuba.

Chesimard murdered New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster in 1973—she “shot and killed [him] execution-style at close range.” She escaped from prison in 1979 and remains on the FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorists list. Cuba refuses to extradite Chesimard, Morales, and many others to face justice in America.

Thank you for your bravery, Joe. Your father Frank is with us in spirit today.

I would also like to thank our minority witness, Juan Pappier, who is the deputy director for the Americas at Human Rights Watch.