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# **“Dr. Biscet, Prisoner of Conscience Testifies at U.S. Congressional Hearing from Havana”**

*Africa, Global Health and Human Rights Subcommittee  
Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith  
February 16, 2012*

Good afternoon, and welcome to this joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere to focus on just one aspect – though a deeply troubling one – of the overall abysmal human rights record of the dictatorship in Cuba.

Today’s hearing will examine the ongoing violations of the human rights of Cuban political prisoners – from the arrest, prosecution, and persecution of political opponents of the Castro regime to the deplorable conditions of their imprisonment – to the terms under which they are released.

The announcement of the release of some prisoners in late December, in conjunction with the release over the past two years of more than three dozen political prisoners, has been described as a public relations move designed to portray a loosening of Cuba's political repression of opponents. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing and working with Cuba’s human rights champions for decades, and have heard first-hand of the brutality of the Castro government, are not so easily persuaded or deceived.

Cuba has been a totalitarian state with the Cuban Communist Party as the sole legal political party for more than half a century. Upon his seizure of power in Cuba in 1959, Fidel Castro promised a return to constitutional rule and democratic elections with social reforms. However, Castro’s control over the military and government structures allowed his regime to

crush dissent, marginalize resistance leaders and imprison or execute thousands of opponents. Between 1959 and 1962 alone, it is estimated that the Castro regime executed 3,200 people. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled an increasingly radical government. Those who remained in Cuba faced a repressive regime that denied basic human rights.

More than fifty years after Castro's assumption of power in Cuba, the U.S. Department of State human rights report on Cuba describes a government that still denies its citizens the right to change their government; threatens, harasses and beats its opponents through state security forces and government-organized mobs; sentences opponents to harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrarily detains human rights advocates and members of independent organizations, and selectively prosecutes perceived opponents and then denies them a fair trial.

Cuba's political prisoners are held, together with the rest of the prison population, in substandard and unhealthy conditions, where they face physical and sexual abuse. Most prisoners suffer from malnutrition and reside in overcrowded cells without appropriate medical attention. In fact, political prisoners face selective denial of medical care. Cuban prisons fail to segregate those held in pre-trial detention from long-term violent inmates, and minors are often mixed in with adults. Such are the conditions opponents of the Castro regime have faced over the years – some of them for decades.

Armando Valladares, who unfortunately couldn't join us here today but will appear at a future hearing, was a Cuban Postal Bank employee who was arrested for refusing to display a sign on his desk that promoted communism. Mr. Valladares was imprisoned in 1960 at age 23, and spent 22 years in prison. Like many freed political prisoners, Mr. Valladares moved to the United States.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan appointed him to serve as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, a position in which he served for two years. I was with Ambassador Valladares in Geneva when he succeeded in bringing Cuba before the commission for human rights violations and authorizing a UN fact-finding trip to Cuba to investigate prison conditions.

I have read Mr. Valladares' memoir – *Against All Hope* – a book that chronicles his experiences and that of others in Cuba's gulags. Mr. Valladares systematically describes the torture, cruelty, and degrading treatment by Cuban prison guards. Yet, like so many other heroic Cuban dissidents, he persisted and overcame.

Our surprise witness today is the brilliant, humanitarian Dr. Óscar Elías Biscet. A medical doctor and courageous human rights advocate, Dr. Biscet was one of more than two dozen dissidents who were arrested and detained by Cuban police in August 1999 for organizing meetings in Havana and Matanzas. He was released after five days but was rearrested three more times. The second time he was arrested, later in 1999, he spent three years in prison. His third arrest in December 2002 resulted in a beating, but not imprisonment. Upon his fourth arrest in March 2003, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Along with more than 50 other dissidents, Dr. Biscet was released in March 2011 with the help of the Catholic Church. He has

courageously remained in Cuba, where he continues to advocate for human rights. For his extraordinary bravery and commitment to freedom for the Cuban people, many of us have twice recommended Dr. Biscet for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Other political prisoners have not had the ability to choose where they live following their release. Normando Hernández González, an independent writer and journalist, was arrested in March 2003 along with 74 other dissidents in Camaguey and was sentenced to 25 years in prison. As a result of his serious abuse in prison, Mr. Hernández eventually was diagnosed with several diseases of the digestive system and later tuberculosis. Due to his deteriorating medical condition, Mr. Hernández was released from prison in July 2010 and taken to the Havana Airport, where he was briefly reunited with his wife and daughter before being forced to board an overnight flight to Spain. He later emigrated to Miami, where he currently resides.

I extend the gratitude of the subcommittee to our distinguished witnesses for joining us today. My good friend and colleague Dan Burton, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia, will testify about U.S. policy toward Cuba. In particular, we are deeply appreciative that Dr. Biscet is taking the serious risk that he will suffer retaliation for speaking with us publicly. The Castro regime should know that there will be a price to pay if that should happen. It is our sincere hope that it does not, and that this hearing and the spotlight that it will shine on Cuban political prisoners will contribute to authentic freedom and respect for the human rights of all the people of Cuba.