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## Congress of the United States

### House of Representatives

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### **Human Rights in Cuba Press Conference Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) April 9, 2009**

Good morning and thank you for coming here today. I'm here with Congressman Frank Wolf and a group of former political prisoners and human rights activists to talk about serious violations of human rights in Cuba.

Although we have been denied twice before, Mr. Wolf and I are again today requesting visas from the Cuban government to visit.

Earlier this week seven Members of the House of Representatives traveled to Cuba and met with either Raul Castro or Fidel Castro or both. They left Cuba gushing with praise for the Castros and their regime.

One Member said: "During my visit to Cuba, I experienced freedom of travel, freedom of religion and the freedom of speech."

Though another Member of Congress mentioned "the suffering of political prisoners,"—sounded good at first—unfortunately he was talking about five convicted Cuban spies serving sentences in American prisons.

Yet another Member of Congress assured us that Raul, "said everything was on the table" in the move toward establishing diplomatic relations with the U.S.

Are they kidding? Are basic human rights for Cubans in Cuba on the table? And did they do anything at all to put them on the table?

I sincerely hope they did. But sadly, to the best of my knowledge, they did nothing publicly to show any concern for the myriad gross human rights abuses perpetrated by the Cuban government, or the tragic fate of hundreds of Cuban democracy and human rights activists, that nation's best, brightest and bravest men and women. Yet they held press conferences at which they heaped and lavished their praise and affection for a government the United States State Department only six weeks ago called "totalitarian."

The State Department's 2008 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* said :

At year's end there were at least 205 political prisoners and detainees. As many as 5,000 citizens served sentences for 'dangerousness,' without being charged with any specific crime. The following human rights problems were reported: beatings and abuse of detainees and prisoners, including human rights activists, carried out with impunity; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; harassment, beatings, and threats against political opponents by government-recruited mobs, police, and State Security officials; arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights advocates and members of independent professional organizations; denial of fair trial; and interference with privacy, including pervasive monitoring of private communications. There were also severe limitations on freedom of speech and press; denial of peaceful assembly and association; restrictions on freedom of movement, including selective denial of exit permits to citizens and the forcible removal of persons from Havana to their hometowns; restrictions on freedom of religion; and refusal to recognize domestic human rights groups or permit them to function legally.

Over the past 50 years the Castros and their secret police have been directly responsible for killing thousands of nonviolent, courageous pro-democracy activists and for jailing and torturing tens of thousands. And they continue to this day, to perpetrate their brutal crimes, as the State Department report and numerous human rights NGOs recount in frightening detail.

Before the Obama administration even thinks about permitting further travel to Cuba or altering the trade embargo on Cuba, both the White House and Congress have a moral obligation—a duty—to ensure that the Cuban dictatorship releases all prisoners of conscience, makes substantial progress in respecting freedom of religion, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of assembly, and holds free and fair elections.

I—and many—are profoundly disappointed that Members of Congress have again traveled to a totalitarian country and failed to visit prisoners of conscience, all of whom are systematically abused, tortured, starved and degraded.

They failed to visit their harassed families. They failed to visit courageous human rights advocates on the island who risk all on a daily basis including Jorge Luis Garcia Perez, "Antunez" who has been on a hunger strike since mid February. His sister, Berta, a former political prisoner is here and will speak shortly.

The lawmakers failed to even attempt a visit with Dr. Oscar Biscet, a medical doctor and human rights reformer who, was detained 26 times in 18 months before he got a new, totally unjust 25 year prison sentence in 2003. Dr. Biscet has been treated with such wanton cruelty, including months in solitary confinement that many of us fear he may not survive the torture imposed on him by the Castro brothers. When the tragic plight of political prisoners is ignored, suppressed, devalued or trivialized, by visiting politicians, the bullies in the gulags are given a free pass to inflict pain.

We have to be clear about this: silence on human rights—especially prisoners of conscience—is the price the Cuban government wants to extract from Members of Congress who seek to travel to Cuba. The Cuban government routinely denies lawmakers who have criticized its human rights record any access to the country itself—but for Members of Congress who signal they will be docile, it rolls out the red carpet.

On two previous occasions the Cuban government has refused to issue visas to Representative Wolf and me—in 2003, and again in February of this year. Yet when Russia was under a communist dictatorship, the Soviet government issued visas to both of us, many times. In the 80's the Soviet government allowed Frank Wolf and me to visit Perm Camp 35—the infamous gulag in the Ural Mountains where political prisoners including Natan Sharansky suffered. In like manner, the Chinese government permitted us visits to China, and, shortly after the massacre at Tiananmen Square, we visited Beijing Prison #1, where approximately 40 Tiananmen activists were unjustly imprisoned.

Today Representative Wolf and I make a third official request for a visa to Cuba. Of course, I will say up front that, if we are granted a visa, we will raise questions of human rights, and we will try to visit political prisoners. We ask you to carry this message to Cuba's political prisoners by wire story and broadcast and word of mouth—"You are not forgotten!" Millions of people in the United States and around the world and many in the U.S. Congress know you are there and deeply admire, respect and honor your tremendous courage. We will never cease striving to effectuate your release and the matriculation of Cuba from dictatorship to democracy.

Long ago I learned that, when the U.S. government embraces and coddles dictators and turns its back on political prisoners, the jailers taunt the prisoners with this. They tell them—"You are forgotten! No one knows you are here! No one is trying to help you!" The beatings actually increase.

"You are forgotten and abandoned" is a terrible thing to hear—to be taunted with—when you are in the Combinado de Este prison, eating worm-infested rice in a cell the size of a closet, standing in open sewage, trying to keep up your spirits to survive another day of punches and beatings. But I am afraid prisoners are hearing just that after the Congressional visit that ended this week.

We must do everything we can to send a different message—that the American people and Congress stand in solidarity with every Cuban man, woman and child who yearns to be free, including and especially the prisoners of conscience. To the Cuban government: free the political prisoners, respect human rights and don't be so afraid to issue Mr. Wolf and me a visa.