

**FURTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN
CASTRO'S CUBA: THE CONTINUED ABUSE OF
POLITICAL PRISONERS**

JOINT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

AND THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

OF THE

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FURTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN CASTRO'S CUBA: THE CONTINUED ABUSE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2012

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,
AND HUMAN RIGHTS, AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittees met, pursuant to notice, at 2 o'clock p.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Christopher H. Smith (chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights) presiding.

Mr. SMITH. The subcommittees will come to order.

I want to wish everyone a good afternoon and welcome to this joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, as well as the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, to focus on just one aspect, though a very troubling one, and that is of the overall abysmal human rights record of the dictatorship in Cuba.

Today's hearing marks the beginning of a series of hearings on human rights in Cuba, and today we will be examining 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 2 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 having heard from them firsthand of the brutality of the Castro government, are not so easily persuaded or deceived that somehow things are improving.

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 them fundamental basic human rights.

More than 50 years after Castro's assumption of power in Cuba, the U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Report on Cuba describes it as a government that still denies its citizens the right to change their government; that threatens, harasses, and beats its opponents through state security forces and government organized mobs; that sentences opponents to harsh and life threatening prison conditions; that arbitrarily detains human rights advocates and members of independent organizations and that 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 profoundly 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 Castro's regime have faced over the years, and some of them have faced it for decades.

I would note that we have with us today in the audience a man who spent 22 years in Castro's prisons. Mr. Guzman, if you wouldn't mind just standing and being recognized and thanked.

[Applause.]

I would also point out to you another man who I have gotten to know over the years, Armando Valladares, who unfortunately couldn't join us here today, but will appear at a future hearing. He 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 the age of 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 U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a position in which he served for 2 years. I met with Ambassador Valladares in Geneva when he succeeded in bringing Cuba before that Commission for human rights violations and authorized a U.N. fact-finding trip to Cuba to investigate Cuban prisons.

I will never forget; assurances were given to everyone that anyone who came forward would not be retaliated against, and to a person everyone who came forward was retaliated against.

I have read Mr. Valladares' memoir; it is called "Against All Hope." I actually read it twice; it is a book that chronicles his experiences and that of others in Cuba's gulags.

Mr. Valladares describes the systematic use of torture, cruelty, and degrading treatment by Cuban prison guards, yet like so many other heroic dissidents, he persisted and he overcame. I remember

when he talked about how they actually immersed Cuban dissidents in excrement, put them into human waste, which caused ear infections, nose infections, eye infections. It was not only degrading; it was so unhealthy that many got very, very sick from it.

Today our surprise witness will be a brilliant humanitarian, Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet. A medical doctor and courageous human rights advocate, Dr. Biscet was one of more than two dozen dissidents who was arrested and detained by Cuban police back in August 1999 for organizing meetings on behalf of human rights.

He was released after 5 days but was rearrested three more times. The second time he was arrested, later in 1999, he spent 3 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 recognized and recommended him, Dr. Biscet, for the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr. Biscet is in Cuba and will be with us shortly by way of a phone hook-up.

Other political prisoners have not had the ability to choose where they will 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. We will hear from him momentarily.

I extend the gratitude of the subcommittee, to our distinguished witnesses for joining us today, and we will begin our testimony with Congressman Dan Burton. He is now chairman of the Europe and Eurasia subcommittee, and I will introduce him properly in a moment.

He has always been a leader on human rights in Cuba, and everywhere else, but actually was the author of important legislation, which I know he will speak to, several years ago. And so I will get to that in a moment, but thank you, Chairman Burton, for being here.

I would like to now yield to my good friend and colleague Albio Sires for any opening comments he might have.

Mr. SIREs. Thank you, Chairman Smith, Chairman Mack, for holding this hearing. It is crucial that my colleagues and I in Congress do whatever we can to draw attention to the brutal realities in Cuba.

It is a privilege to have with us former political prisoners who can describe firsthand the oppressive nature of the Castro regime.

Just weeks ago, another hero for freedom and democracy, Wilman Villar Mendoza, lost his life at the hands of Castro's thugs in Cuba. And the end of this month will mark the 2-year anniversary of the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo. These men died fighting for basic human rights, the kind of rights that so many of us take for granted in this country.

The Castro brothers are ruthless leaders with no regards for human life and have no interest in reform. While the United States has offered several concessions to Cuba in the last few years, we have only witnessed continued brutality on the island.

You know, as someone who came from Cuba at the age of 11, my mind is still very clear on some of the things that my family went through, including having the military come into our house, take inventory of every item once you file for a visa to leave, including the military search in our house because my father was accused of having contraband in the house. And this was back in 1962. And I can go on and on with stories of neighbors that were taken in the middle of the night.

So it is crucial for us to have a hearing to depict what these people do in Cuba. Somehow over the years there has been this romanticism with this revolution. You know, this revolution brought dictators—dictators for over 50 years. All these supposed changes that are happening are just window dressings. There hasn't been one substantive change in Cuba to bring democracy, or to allow the people to express their will.

You read stories about the Ladies in White and the thugs that beat up on women just because they clamor for democracy, freedom, and for the health of the ones that are in jail.

So, my colleagues, thank you very much for bringing attention to this situation. I want to personally compliment Congressman Burton. He has been in the forefront on our efforts to bring a change in Cuba for many, many years. And I am sorry that he is leaving, but he has really been a friend to our efforts, and thank you for being here.

Thank you, Chairman, for being here.

Mr. SMITH. The gentlelady from Ohio, Ms. Schmidt.

Ms. SCHMIDT. Thank you, Mr. Smith, for holding this. And thank you, Mr. Sires, for your personal testimony.

You know, I was in Cuba in 2002, I think it was, on a trip from Ohio, a legal trip. And I saw firsthand the abusive nature of the Cuban regime. We were watched at each and every step along the way. We were not allowed to have really free discussion with the folks that we interacted with in Cuba.

So from a personal perspective, I know that everything is guarded and watched. And I understand this is the phone call. We are going to take it?

Mr. SMITH. In a moment, yes.

Ms. SCHMIDT. In a moment. Well, I will be very brief. I am very impressed with the level of people that we are having as—

Mr. SMITH. Please continue.

Ms. SCHMIDT. I am very impressed with the witnesses that we are going to have today. Mr. Hernández will testify today. The reward for your honesty, sir, was a life sentence, practically, in a

Cuban prison, and we have already heard some of the torment that you continue to suffer because of the cruelty of that regime.

Dr. Biscet will also testify via telephone and I understand that he is once again, because I signed the letter, being asked to be considered for a Nobel Peace Prize. Quite frankly, I think everyone that served under that regime and continues to shout for liberty and democracy in that corner of the world deserves recognition and a Peace Prize.

Cuba retains its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, and we in the United States need to recognize that. We need to understand that they are working in connection with Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, all to subvert the democracy here in the Americas. We in the United States must understand that anything that we do that helps the Cuban regime monetarily will only hurt the Cuban citizens.

In 2009, one of our American citizens, Alan Gross, was a USAID subcontractor. He was arrested because he was distributing communications equipment to Jewish communities in Cuba. Fourteen months after his arrest and incarceration, Mr. Gross was unfairly and unjustly charged, tried, and convicted. He is currently serving a 15-year sentence in what can only be described as the worst hole you can ever imagine.

While this administration and our President has called for Mr. Gross' release, this administration has really done very little to make sure that that actually happens. Instead of aggressively pursuing his release, our administration is busily making concessions to Cuba and loosening travel and remittance restrictions. This must not happen.

Instead of engaging to help the Castro regime, we should be engaging with the Cuban people and helping them become liberated citizens.

I yield back my time.

Mr. SMITH. Ranking Member Engel.

Mr. ENGEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing. And I am glad that our two subcommittees are teaming up on this.

Human rights is something that is very important, obviously important for obvious reasons. The United States has been the beacon of freedom throughout the world for many, many years. And when you look at countries that have been the opposite, unfortunately Cuba always comes to mind.

You know, there are very few things that I remember when I was a boy that haven't changed much now that I am more mature. And one of them is the lack of human rights in Cuba. The tactics that the Cuban regime has used back in the 1960s are similar to the tactics that they use now with imprisonment and all kinds of other horror stories that we have heard through the years.

And while dictators have come and gone and regimes have come and gone, in Cuba, unfortunately for its people, nothing has really changed. When we look and see—people said that once the Soviet Union fell, there would be freedom and change in Cuba as there were in so many of the Eastern European countries, we haven't seen any change at all. Anything we have seen is simply window dressing.

So I am glad that we continue in the Congress to be vigilant and to focus attention on Cuba's terrible human rights policy.

Mr. Gross, who many of us have been concerned—an American citizen—is languishing in a Cuban prison. And we, of course, have as our priority to get him out. But there are many other people, Cuban citizens as well, languishing in Cuban prisons. Their only hope is that we in the United States continue to shine a light on the tyranny that is happening. And one day we all hope that Cuba will be free. We know that will happen one day, and we hope we can make it sooner rather than later.

With that, I yield back, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Engel.

Mr. Rivera, the gentleman from Florida.

Mr. RIVERA. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding this important hearing, because it adds to the record that needs to be placed in the public mind-set regarding the reality that is Cuba today. And this reality of Cuba today did not start in recent months or years or even decades.

This reality of a lack of human rights and civil liberties inside Cuba started in 1959 where Cuba's record of throwing people into prison, just because they are prisoners of conscience, began when thousands and thousands of political prisoners were put in jail by the Castro communist totalitarian dictatorship.

Throughout the decade of the 1960s, throughout the decade of the 1970s, and it was not until, I would say, the mid and late 1980s, during the Reagan administration, when as you mentioned former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Armando Valladares, was named to the post, where the tragedy that is the reality of Cuba really came to light in an international forum.

And I recall you being there at the United Nations Human Rights Commission, along with Congressman Burton as well, and I also recall those condemnations on a multilateral basis from so many countries that were members of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, being ignored. And the request from the Human Rights Commission to send a special rapporteur into Cuba to investigate the human rights abuses were also ignored and rejected by the Castro dictatorship.

And that happened throughout the decade of the 1990s where international organizations tried to go into Cuba and monitor and review the situation of human rights and were always rebuffed. Just recently even during this last decade, there have been several waves of repression across the island.

We have had the Black Spring earlier in the decade, but even more recently, in the last couple of years, we have also seen yet another wave of repression and human rights abuses, which again demonstrate the complete lack of human rights and civil liberties inside Cuba.

Some of those examples of abuse have been mentioned. People that have been on hunger strikes and have died on hunger strikes, sacrificed their liberty and actually sacrificed their lives, people like Orlando Zapata Tamayo, Wilman Villar Mendoza, Laura Pollán, who was one of the leaders of the Ladies in White, courageous, heroic women that peacefully demonstrate in support of

human rights and civil liberties in Cuba that are summarily beaten and jailed inside Cuba.

So that is why it is so important to make sure that we have hearings like this, and make sure that we have condemnations—moral and otherwise—of what is going on inside Cuba. We need to have multilateral condemnations from the United Nations, the United Nations Human Rights Commission. We need to have unilateral condemnations.

This administration needs to step up the focus and the effort to condemn Cuba, condemn the Castro dictatorship. I believe that has been quite lacking in recent years when we have all seen the cases of human rights abuses occurring inside Cuba.

The community I represent, much like my friend from New Jersey, Albio Sires, is filled with examples—from decades ago and from more recent years, filled with examples of former political prisoners, men and women, many women, former political prisoners that were tortured, imprisoned, and that were prisoners of conscience.

Today, inside Cuba many of these same people are fighting for the future of Cuba, and that future is represented by these brave human rights activists fighting inside Cuba, which is another reason it is so important to maintain the spotlight on human rights abuses in Cuba; to maintain and highlight heroes like Dr. Biscet, who we will be hearing from; to maintain the focus on cases like Alan Gross, that Congresswoman Schmidt mentioned earlier; and making sure that that demonstrates to the world a stark reminder of the lack of basic rights inside Cuba.

So, again, Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for this hearing. Thank you for maintaining that spotlight. It is wholly justified, and hopefully more people throughout the United States and throughout the world will be listening.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Rivera, thank you very much for your very eloquent statement.

I would like to now introduce our first witness, and he is the man who is the author of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996, and that is Chairman Dan Burton, who is now serving in his 15th term as a Member of the House from Indiana. He previously served in the Indiana House and Senate before coming to Congress in 1983.

And the Helms-Burton Act, named after the two sponsors of that legislation, was truly remarkable and transformational. I want to thank him for his leadership on that, and I will yield to my good friend and colleague.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DAN BURTON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF INDIANA

Mr. BURTON. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate your allowing me to testify. I am not going to be redundant. You have covered so much ground here, and you have so many extraordinary witnesses that are going to be testifying, I am going to limit my remarks. I will submit a statement for the record.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. BURTON. The reason we passed the Helms-Burton law was not just because of the persecution that was taking place on the is-

land of Cuba but because the Castro government shot down three planes—the Brothers to the Rescue, who were sending messages to the people in Cuba by flying over and dropping leaflets talking about freedom and democracy and human rights. And when that happened it raised the concern of everybody in America, and we immediately said we have got to do something to put pressure on the Castro regime to bring about some positive change.

We passed the Helms-Burton law, better known as the LIBERTAD Act, and it was a step in the right direction. The problem that we have is that the legislation has not been as enforced as it should have been. And for that we have a great deal of regret.

I know Mr. Rivera, who worked with us back in those days when he was much younger—he is getting a little bit of gray hair now—and you, Mr. Chairman, and all of my colleagues up there were—I know you were very interested in that as well. We were concerned and we wanted to bring about some positive change.

Unfortunately, we have not enforced, as I said, the Helms-Burton law. The spread of communism is still a big threat. Back during the Reagan administration, we had the Reagan Doctrine, and most of the countries in Central and South America started moving toward democracy.

Now, because of Chavez in Venezuela and Castro in Cuba, and a number of the other countries down there, we see a movement back toward the left and toward communism and toward repression. So the repression takes place not only in Cuba, but throughout many of the countries in Central and South America.

The thing that bothers me a great deal is when people send remittances down to Cuba to help their families and their loved ones, the government of Fidel Castro benefits from that. And I think it is very unfortunate. Approximately 20 percent of all the remittances that go down there are given to the Fidel Castro government or the Raul Castro government, and they use that to further their ends in that country.

So I think it is extremely important that we have hearings like this, that we point out the horrible things that are going on in Cuba and continue to go on.

One of the things that I like to stress when I speak—and you have mentioned it before—Armando Valladares—is a book that he wrote about his prison experience. It is called “Against All Hope,” and I think my colleagues have probably all read that. But for those of you that haven’t, I would submit that it would be a great thing for you to take the time to read, because it really points out very clearly the horrible, horrible things that go on in those prisons down there due to the political prisoner situation.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you very much for having this hearing. My statement will be submitted for the record, and I look forward to hearing what your witnesses have to say today. And thank you very much for having this hearing.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Burton follows:]

Testimony
Congressman Dan Burton
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

As the former Chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee and author of one of the most important pieces of legislation in the Cuba-U.S. relationship, I would like to thank Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Payne, Chairman Mack and Ranking Member Engel, for holding this timely joint hearing today. It is essential that we continue to bring to light the ongoing gross human rights violations and atrocities committed by the Castro regime. The Cuban people, like all of us, deserve basic human rights. I believe that these rights will only come as a result of the removal of the Castro brothers from power and the reinstatement of constitutional democracy.

For the past 53 years, more than eleven million Cuban people have been subject to the iron fists of the Castro brothers. From its inception, this regime has been anti-U.S., repeating a pathetic David and Goliath narrative in order to blame their economic, social and political problems on the United States. This narrative has succeeded thus far and its acceptance serves to solidify the Castro's grip on power. At every turn, the Castro regime has sought to unite with enemies of the United States, no matter how culturally and ideologically different. During the cold war, they allied with the Soviet Union. Now, they are actively engaging Iran.

The resilience of this regime has significantly contributed to the leftward and more undemocratic movement of many Latin American nations. We are seeing populist leftist regimes such as that of Chavez in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua, Correa in Ecuador and Morales of Bolivia rise to power aided and abetted by the Communist Regime in Cuba. These leaders have gone to great lengths to suppress freedoms, censor the opposition and even change their constitutions, in order to maintain their hold on power. I believe that our policy toward Cuba is crucial to the success of our policy towards other nations in the Western Hemisphere.

When we passed the LIBERTAD Act of 1996, known also as Helms-Burton, our goal was to isolate the Castro brothers. I still stand by this law and I agree with the great majority of the Cuban exile community that there will be no change in Cuba while a Castro is in charge. Only after regime change will Cuba's people be truly free.

The argument that the economic embargo hasn't worked and should be done away with is misguided. It can work. Unfortunately the fact is that there is no true embargo on Cuba in place. The U.S. is one of the biggest exporters of food to the island and Cuban-Americans send hundreds of millions of dollars annually back home to their relatives, propping up a black-market for goods and services that the Communist system does not provide - remittances which are highly taxed by the Castro regime. The moment that we started allowing food sales to the Cuban regime and remittances to go through, was the moment the embargo became more of a symbol than a policy tool. The fact that the "embargo" hasn't worked and the regime is all the more autocratic really means that our policies should become more stringent, not less so.

The alternative, that has been supported by many members of this committee, has failed miserably. As a result of open tourism and international investment, the regime has recently

enjoyed a tremendous influx of money from Canadians, Latin Americans, and Europeans who have access to the island. Why haven't these tourists from democratic countries transformed this dictatorship into a democracy? The answer is that the regime barely lets tourists travel outside Veradero Beach or historical landmarks in Havana. It guarantees as little interaction between tourists and locals as possible, though it looks the other way in regards to the thriving sex trade.

This so-called openness has done little if anything to help those whose political and economic freedoms are suppressed. I wish I could tell you that stories like that of Armando Valladares, who was imprisoned in 1960 for 23 years, are no longer being written. He was deemed counter-revolutionary because he refused to display a communist sign on his bank desk. These atrocities are still happening. In March of 2003, while the world was watching the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Cuba experienced a brutal crackdown by the Castro regime to crush the efforts by the Cuban people to achieve a free and democratic Cuba. This "black spring" as it was later called, resulted in the arrest of 75 dissidents, 29 of them journalists, on the charge of "dangerousness." In Cuba, it is entirely lawful to arrest someone if one has suspicion that the individual may be inclined to dissent against the state. This is part of the reason why thousands of Cubans still 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. The regime denies citizens the right to change their government.

We must continue to send a strong message to the Cuban government that the United States will not forget those people who are languishing in Cuban prisons for the so-called crime of speaking out against the injustices perpetrated by the Castro regime.

I commend the bravery of men like Orlando Zapata Tamayo who died in protest of the ill conditions of the prison system. No prisoner in Cuba has access to the much-touted Cuban universal health care system. In fact, according to the State Department's 2010 report, the prisons are overcrowded, infested with vermin and prisoners are often sick and inadequately treated. Women are denied access to feminine hygiene products and adequate prenatal care as well as being subjected to sexual abuse and violence.

Prisoners who are released from these hellish prisons are most often forced to leave Cuba, their home, as a condition of release. While I celebrate the fact that they are free from prison, I mourn the thought that they have to join the ranks of thousands of Cuban exiles throughout the world, who want nothing more than to return to their home as free citizens, an impossible wish as long as the Castros remain in power.

The Obama Administration needs to be more focused on our neighbor, and to make a concerted effort to produce real results. According to Human Rights Watch, the "divided and even contradictory nature" of policies of Latin America, Canada, Europe and the United States "has allowed the Cuban government to evade effective pressure and deflect criticism of its practices." If Canada, Europe and democracy and freedom loving nations of Latin America would join us in the economic embargo, we might see a different Cuba. The solution is not appeasement.

I have hope there will be a day when the light of democracy shines in Havana, a day when free expression and free elections replace the current hopeless status quo. Only then will I start

talking about changing the Helms-Burton law. I want to see democracy and freedom in Cuba but until that happens we must keep the pressure on Fidel and Raul.

I am convinced that there will never be true lasting peace and freedom in the region until we solve the Cuba problem once and for all. The only acceptable solution is a free and democratic Cuba.

Mr. SMITH. Chairman Burton, thank you so very much. Again, your legislation is legendary, and thank you for your authorship. It has made a huge difference.

I would like to welcome you, if you would like to join the panel.

Mr. BURTON. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. We would love to have you.

I would like to now introduce Dr. Oscar Biscet, who, as stated earlier, is a Cuban physician and human rights advocate who has been imprisoned and tortured numerous times by the Castro regime. This extraordinary man of conscience has been unjustly called dangerous and a counterrevolutionary by the Castro regime, and labeled a prisoner of conscience by the international human rights community.

In 1997, he founded the Lawton Foundation in Havana which works to secure human rights in Cuba and around the world. He has worked tirelessly for freedom in Cuba. And because of his work, my colleagues have nominated him—as a matter of fact, this time our distinguished Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen has led an effort to nominate Dr. Biscet for the Nobel Peace Prize. We did it 2 years ago. It is time that he be recognized in Oslo for the tremendous work he has done.

Despite being imprisoned at the time, Dr. Biscet received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bush in 2007. Dr. Biscet was released from prison on March 11, 2011, and will be participating in this hearing by a telephone connection from the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

The floor is yours, Dr. Biscet.

**STATEMENT OF OSCAR ELÍAS BISCET, M.D., HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVOCATE, FORMER CUBAN POLITICAL PRISONER**

Dr. BISCET. Good afternoon. I am Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet. I am a specialist in internal medicine, and I am the president of the Lawton Foundation for Human Rights, and I received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007.

I am giving a testimony in front of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights. And under the presence of our Biblical God, this is solely the truth of what has happened.

I express my deep gratitude for this invitation to the great defender of liberty to the Cuban people, Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and I express my great admiration for the altruistic labor in the cause of the Cuban people to the Cuban-American Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, David Rivera, Albio Sires, Robert Menendez, and Marco Rubio.

Many greetings to all of the great individuals that are gathered with us today. The Cuba in which I live in is a society full of fear. It has been directed by a totalitarian socialist regime since 1959. This regime is characteristically anti-American, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black. Its permanence in power is due to the use of terror and extreme police control over the citizens.

The dictatorship of the Castro brothers commits systematic and flagrant violations against human rights for the Cuban people. The lack of basic freedom in my society motivated me to become a

human rights activist and to attain these rights for the people of Cuba through non-violent resistance.

The political police has beaten me, disfigured my face, and in another occasion broken my foot. These were things that were done through the orders of the dictatorship, and they were seeking to coerce me to stop my human rights activism through torture and cruel acts that are inhumane. The idea was to stop me from anything that I could do to defend human rights.

In not gaining their objectives, they put me in prison for almost 12 years. Nevertheless, if these acts would have been done only against me, they would not have the important historical significance that they do. The great problem is that these horrible violations of human dignity are committed through the entire population of Cuba, and in general all of the people that are incarcerated.

The penitentiary system in Cuba does not adhere to the regulations put forth by the United Nations for people who are imprisoned. In this system, I was very much tortured, but most of all the people that I know and my family were tortured. But the worst part is that there were three assassination attempts against me, two of which were hired out by the regime's police.

Some of the tortures or cruel treatment or inhuman treatment that I observed or suffered in these prisons were people who were completely nude and had their hands in handcuffs and then put together with a handcuff at their feet. They were in this position for more than 12, and sometimes up to 24, hours. Individuals who were handcuffed with their hands over their head and the tip of their toes barely touching the floor, and the duration of this torture was the same 12–24 hours.

The use of taser guns as psychological and physical torture. For most of these tortures they would undress the prisoner collectively with any respect for human dignity. The negation of any medical attention to the individuals that were imprisoned. The existence of those individuals in prison have no human dignity at all.

And many times there is no natural light, and in other times not even artificial light. There is no drinkable water, no ventilation, no place to use the restroom, and no ability to speak to anyone else.

Many of these political prisoners are forced to suffer alongside prisoners who have actually committed real crimes, and this is used as a form of coercion to make them feel like they are criminals as well.

In 1996, you approved the Law of Liberty and Democratic Solidarity with Cuba. This is a great political instrument that has been applied in solidarity with the Cuban people, looking for change to create liberty and democracy for the Cuban people. We are looking for these liberties and democracy for the Cuban people.

The dictatorship of the Castro brothers has been a part of the most abhorrent global events. I will only make a few references. These are a few: Unconditional support for the imperialistic invasion in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979; also, in the 21st century, the expansionist invasion of Russia into Georgia; unlimited defense for the regimes of Milosevic, Hussein, and Ghadafi; training, both military and logistical, for the guerrillas in

Colombia, and the presence of operational bases for the Muslim extremists of Hezbollah and Hamas in Cuba.

If we continue this political indifference against the communist regime in Cuba, I fear that in a very short time we will have another missile crisis in the same style of October 1962. However, the participants now would be Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, and the United States.

Tomorrow we will celebrate, with great pride, the fourth anniversary of the freedom of Kosovo. Five years ago, you, the United States, promised firm support for their independence. You were so firm in this promise with love and honor that many countries united themselves in this cause, and you triumphed. This is the kind of support that I ask of you for my people, so that they can be free and sovereign.

I wish the best to you, your families, and to the United States of America. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Biscet follows:]

Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet
President, The Lawton Foundation for Human Rights
February 16, 2012
House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights

I am Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet

Internal Medicine Specialist

President of the Lawton Foundation for Human Rights

Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007

All the testimony given by me before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights and in the presence of the Biblical God, is the sole truth about the events that have taken place.

I wish to express my gratitude to my compatriot and defender of freedom for the Cuban people, Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for extending this invitation and my admiration of the Cuban-American members of Congress, Mario Diaz-Balart, David Rivera, Albio Sires, Robert Menéndez and Marco Rubio for their altruistic efforts on behalf of the Cuban cause.

Warmest greetings to all the prominent individuals gathered here today.

Cuba, where I reside, is a society of fear. Since 1959, it has been run by a communist totalitarian regime in the style of Stalin.

This regime is essentially characterized as being anti-American, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black. Its permanence is due to its use of State terrorism and extreme police control over its citizens.

The dictatorship of the Castros commits flagrant and systematic violations of the human rights of the Cuban people.

The lack of basic liberties in our society motivated me to become an activist for human rights and to regain them for the Cuban people through non-violent resistance.

These humanitarian goals led to my suffering great vicissitudes at the hands of the Castro government's political police.

The following are some of the most horrific events endured:

Once, during a conference at the Materno Infantil de Diez de

Octubre hospital, in 1998, while making a presentation to my colleagues about the right to life, a mob of members of the Communist Party violently expelled me from the hospital's classroom.

Ever since that day, Cuba's communist regime has not allowed me to practice the noble profession of medicine.

At the same time, my wife and son were threatened and blackmailed to get them to abandon me. Their firm decision to stand by me caused my wife to be fired from her employment and my son's inability to begin his university studies. We were all evicted from the house, which also served as a medical office, where my wife worked as an exemplary registered nurse.

During that period, I was arrested dozens of times. I was placed in walled cells along with murderers and others with personality disorders who had just committed bloody criminal acts.

The political police is beaten me, disfigured me, and caused me dental fractures. On one occasion they fractured my right foot.

These agents, while following the orders of the dictatorship, tried to coerce and intimidate me through torture and cruel and inhumane treatment, with the objective of having me give up my humanitarian activism. Unable to meet their objective, they imprisoned me for about a dozen years.

However, if these actions had been taken only against my person, they would lack historical importance. The big problem is that these aberrations and violations of human dignity are committed against the general population and that imprisoned in the country's jails.

The Cuban socialist penitentiary system does not comply with the minimum requirements for the care of prisoners established by the United Nations. Due to this, they tortured not only me but also my family members.

Most disturbing is the fact that three prisoners tried to assassinate me on different occasions; two of them had been hired by military officers of the inland cities.

Some of the torture and cruel and inhumane treatment that I observed or suffered while in socialist prisons were:

Individuals were kept prone with their hands, toward their back, handcuffed to their feet for more than twelve hours, sometimes over twenty four hours.

Individuals were handcuffed with hands extended over their head while the tips of their toes slightly touched the floor. The duration of these events was similar to the ones described previously.

Taser guns were used for psychological and physical torture.

During searches, prisoners would have to strip while in groups without any regard for human modesty.

As a form of retaliation, inmates are denied medical attention. Many of these types of cases exist. I will limit myself to exposing two which impressed me as a human being and also due to my knowledge of medical science:

I was in the punishment cells at the prison Cuba Si in the Holguin Province in 2002. An inmate, in protest of the prison authorities, inserted a sharp object into his abdomen. He was kept in that condition for two days until I found out about it and protested strongly. He was taken to the hospital; he underwent surgery due to acute peritonitis.

There was a young inmate who had two non-communicable chronic conditions, asthma and cardiac problems related to valve pathologies. He was stable but had an appointment with the doctor. He complained because he was not taken to see the doctor and was given such a beating that he died. This occurred on the second floor of the first building at Combinado del Este prison in 2010.

Prisoners are held in cells under subhuman conditions. There is no natural light, sometimes not even artificial light; no potable water; no ventilation; overcrowding; prisoners coexisting with vectors and more.

Scores of prisoners suffer these same human miseries and, even worse, are being housed with common offenders who are utilized by the penal authorities to try to stop political prisoners from maintaining a posture of challenge.

I would like to take this opportunity to greet two compatriots who are supporters of liberty for humanity who will be testifying before this Committee, a former political prisoner who is one of the 75 prisoners of the Black Spring of 2003, Normando Hernández and Indiana's Representative Dan Burton, who along with Senator Jesse Helms, was a promoter of the Helms Burton Act of 1996.

If all the articles and chapters of this magnificent legal-political document were enforced, it would persuade and motivate all free nations towards solidarity and to seek changes leading to freedom and democracy for the Cuban people.

The dictatorship of the Castro brothers has played a role in all embarrassing and condemnable world events. I will make reference to a few of them:

It offered unconditional support to the imperialistic Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and of Afghanistan in 1979.

It also supported, during the first decade of the Twenty-first Century, Russia's expansionist invasion of Georgia.

It offered unlimited defense to the despotic regimes of S. Milosevic, S. Husein and M. Ghadafi.

Has given military training and logistic support to the Colombian drug guerrillas; and extremist Muslims from Hezbollah and Hamaz have operational bases in Cuba.

If this cold policy of indifference towards the Cuban communist hierarchy persists, I fear that shortly we will have a new missile crisis, such as the one in October of 1962. But this time the players would be Cuba, Venezuela, Iran and the United States.

Tomorrow, we will proudly celebrate the fourth anniversary of Kosovo's independence. Five years ago, you Americans promised the Kosovan-Albanians unwavering support of their independence. You did it with such firmness, honor and love that you had many other nations join you in this just cause, and you triumphed.

This is the kind of support that I would ask of you so that my people would be free and sovereign.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Biscet, thank you for your extraordinary courage. And to remind everyone in this room and those who will read this transcript—and that will be many—you are communicating to us from Cuba, having only recently been let out of prison, knowing that there are risks attendant to your speaking out, as you have done so courageously throughout your life.

So just letting you know how in awe I am, and I know my colleagues are, of you. And I hope that the Cuban Interests Section, which I am sure is here in the room and taking notes, and the Castro regime, by extension, knows that we are all watching how you are treated, not just past and present, but going into the future.

Just a couple of very quick questions, and I yield to my colleagues for any comments they might have. And I want to assure you, Dr. Biscet, that these committees and the Congress will continue—we will hold additional hearings. We are redoubling our efforts to bring scrutiny and life in combating these human rights abuses, as you called them, systematic and flagrant violations.

We applaud your non-violent resistance, which is truly extraordinary.

You have testified about the degrading treatment of stripping prisoners. I would note parenthetically that Cuba has been designated a Tier III country for human trafficking, both sex trafficking, and this, too, is a part of the perversion that is imposed upon people by the government, degrading treatment and perversion.

You talked about political indifference, and that the island is full of fear. My hope would be—our hope would be—that you might answer whether or not they have been indifferent as well—that the Organization for American States, the U.N., especially the Human Rights Council, the European Union, and even the International Criminal Court would investigate these crimes against humanity and take action.

If you can, would you like to respond as to how well or poorly we are doing—Congress, the President, and those bodies I just mentioned? Are we politically indifferent?

Dr. BISCET. We are very grateful for everything that the United States has done. We understand that the problem in Cuba is an internal problem with the regime, and that the international organizations are very, very different.

We appreciate the work that has been done to help us, but the issues and the violations, the human rights violations in Cuba need to be expressed further to these international communities, because they seem not to be getting the point or understanding that this is really happening.

The clear and classic example is that a lot of these countries have signed on to international instruments, but there is no way of enforcing them. So you have the classic case of Cuba who is a signer to many international treaties but doesn't uphold any of the human rights designations.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Biscet, I have many questions, but I will only ask one more out of deference to my colleagues. Pope Benedict will visit Cuba on March 26 to 28. His mission is to evangelize, but he also speaks very strongly on behalf of human rights protections.

It would be my and others' sincerest hope that he would meet with you and others who have been incarcerated and unjustly treated. What would you tell the Pope if you had the opportunity?

Dr. BISCET. I would say to him that I would love for him to lobby for our freedom of speech and for a multi-party system, so that everyone can participate and be represented. We hope that his coming will bring great change to our country.

[The telephone connection is lost.]

Mr. SMITH. We will continue to try to reestablish that contact.

Did you want to comment at least on his testimony before asking some questions, if we get him back?

Mr. SIRES. Well, I think we have seen the testimony of a very courageous individual. And I think that people should think in terms of this man as a product of this revolution. He went to school there. He is not a product of Miami Beach. He is not a product of Miami. He is not a product of Cubans in exile.

This is a man that was educated in Cuba, and he sees that this is a dictator, that this is a country that oppresses human rights, that this is a country that allows no one the freedom to express themselves, and he has personally seen what they do to people who are seeking freedom of expression.

So they can't blame the Cubans in exile as they blame the Cubans in exile for everything. This is a product of this communist regime. And I think we should keep that in mind.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Sires, you are on to ask any questions.

Mr. SIRES. Dr. Biscet?

[No response.]

I am sure that the Cuban Government has something to do with this, the fact that we can't establish a connection.

Hello? Dr. Biscet?

[No response.]

Mr. SMITH. Are there any members that would like to make a comment on that extraordinary testimony as we try to reconnect? Mr. Rivera.

Mr. RIVERA. Thank you, Chairman, for recognizing me. I think Dr. Biscet's response to your question regarding the Pope's visit is very telling, and of course very timely right now, knowing that that visit by the Pope is literally weeks away, because what Dr. Biscet told the world in response to your question is that the opposition movement inside Cuba, the human rights activists, the heroic dissidents, what they are looking for, what they are hoping for from the Pope, and what they are hoping for is that the Pope will call for free and fair expression and self-determination by the Cuban people as expressed through elections; so that the Cuban people can decide their future, their destiny, free of repression, free of the dictatorships, denial of civil liberties that is occurring right now.

And that is very important, because I understand the church, the Catholic Church, when the Pope goes on international visits, they try to make those visits as apolitical as possible. They are evangelical missions. The problem is that in Cuba everything is political.

It is impossible to have any foreign dignitary, particularly one as esteemed and as cherished as the Pope, visit Cuba and it be a completely apolitical visit, because the Castro regime will use that visit

for political purposes, for propaganda purposes, which is something that Dr. Biscet clearly understands, as he responded to your question.

And I would hope that the Catholic Church hierarchy, that the Pope himself, will not only listen to the hierarchy of the church in Cuba and Cardinal Ortega, or be listening to the hierarchy of the Castro government, but I would hope they would be listening to the future leaders of Cuba, that they will be listening to Dr. Biscet and be responsive to the plea that he has made in response to your question here today.

I think it was very clear. You asked him what he would say or ask of the Pope, and he said very clearly, "I would ask the Pope to call for free elections, to allow the Cuban people the right of self-determination, to allow the Cuban people to move forward beyond this tragic reality that has been placed upon them for more than 50 years of the Castro dictatorship."

So thank you for asking him that question, and thank you to Dr. Biscet for his brave and honest and open and courageous response. Now it is up to the Catholic Church to respond to Dr. Biscet. It is up to the Pope himself to respond to Dr. Biscet. Whether he meets with Dr. Biscet or not inside Cuba, we now know what the opposition movement in Cuba is hoping for from the Pope's visit.

We know what the brave dissidents, the future leadership of Cuba, is expecting from the Catholic Church during the Pope's visit. And I would hope they would pay very special attention to what Dr. Biscet just said, and I would hope they would be responsive to Dr. Biscet's hopes and aspirations and his request of the Pope and the Catholic Church.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Rivera, thank you very much.

We are still trying to reestablish contact with Dr. Biscet in Cuba. It is suspicious, at best, as to why the line was cut, and we will continue to try to reestablish that connection.

Would any of my other colleagues like to make a comment? Mr. Engel or anybody on this side?

Mr. ENGEL. Let me just say, Mr. Chairman, I think that the doctor has extraordinary courage. And I think it is courage from people like him that will some day allow Cuba to join the list of free nations in the world.

We, sitting here on our comfortable perches in Washington, can't even imagine the brutality that the doctor has been in, and even more so the terrible situation that the Cuban people have found themselves in for the past half century.

So, you know, in this job, Mr. Chairman, we have all had the good fortune to interact with giants, and the doctor is certainly one of those. It takes a special person to be able to speak his or her mind courageously, knowing full well that there will very well or could very well be a difficult penalty to pay.

But history has been lined with courageous men and women who have not been afraid to speak out, and history has shown time and time again that those are the people who ultimately make the change, get the change. And I have no doubt, again, as we will one day visit a free Cuba, that the doctor will one day be a citizen of a free Cuba, and it will largely be the struggles and the courage

that he and others have exhibited through the years that will make that so.

I thank you, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. We will now move to our next witness, and we welcome him to the subcommittees. We will keep trying to reestablish that contact, but it is with great honor that the subcommittees receive Normando Hernández. Normando Hernández is an independent journalist who has dedicated his career to providing alternative sources of news and information in Cuba, recognized as an extraordinary prisoner of conscience following Cuba's Black Spring in 2003, during which dozens of dissidents and journalists were imprisoned for their activism.

Mr. Hernández was exiled to Spain in 2010, and has since resettled in the United States. He has founded several organizations devoted to human rights and freedom in Cuba and received numerous awards for his work.

Mr. Hernández is currently a Reagan-Fascell Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, or NED, where he is examining the Cuban communications monopoly and considering strategies by which independent journalists may combat totalitarianism and dictatorship.

We thank you, Mr. Hernández, for being here, and look forward to your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF MR. NORMANDO HERNÁNDEZ GONZÁLEZ,
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST, FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER—GROUP OF 75**

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. Thank you very much, Chairman Smith, and all of the Congressmen that are here today, and everyone else who is present. I am very grateful for this invitation, for this opportunity.

A friend this morning told me that my testimony was a bit dramatic, and I told her that, unfortunately, my life has been dramatic. And not just my life, but the lives of the Cuban people.

I am going to save you my personal presentation, which you have so nicely gotten for me. Although I am a fellow of the NED, I want to say that I am speaking on my own personal capacity today, and the views expressed are entirely my own, and that the interruption in communication with Dr. Biscet reminds me of my days as an independent journalist in Cuba when we were constantly having our right to communication and freedom of speech violated.

And that is why I want to begin by telling you that the violence on behalf of the military junta in Cuba against my people increases every day. The Commission from Cuba of Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an independent organization inside of Cuba, confirmed 631 arbitrary arrests in the month of January of this year. This is an increase of 135 percent when it is compared to last year, when last January there were only 268 arrests.

In the streets of Cuba, human rights defenders, especially women, are kicked and beaten in the head by political police, as is the case of Yris Tamara Pérez Aguilera, who has been knocked unconscious due to the different blows to her head. The Ladies in White are also victims of repression.

Many have reported that while they were detained by the police they undress them, shout obscenities at them, they touch their

genitals, and they threaten that they will rape them. We are mourning the death of dissident Juan Wilfredo Soto, who in May 2011 was kicked by a policeman to the point that he died 2 days later as a result of that beating.

In October 2011, just 5 months after his death, they murdered Laura Pollan Toledo, who was the leader of the Ladies in White. And it has only been 28 days since the murder of the prisoner of conscience, Wilmar Villar Mendoza, after 50 days of being on a hunger strike.

I say “murdered” because all of these deaths happened under the custody of the police and were completely avoidable. Three dissidents were killed in the last 8 months, only 90 miles away from the most democratic country in the world.

I would not be honest if I didn’t condemn today the Cuban military junta and call for justice for the martyrs and the people of Cuba. For my part, I would say that I have been in four Cuban prisons. I came into a prison being completely healthy, but now I live with various diseases. And I live without my gall bladder because of torture that I suffered during my final 2 years in prison.

Nevertheless, today I don’t want to speak any more about myself, but instead about the people who are in this same moment being tortured. I want to speak not only of the political prisoners of Cuba, but also of the nearly 100,000 prisoners who live in poor, and of over 250 prisons and labor camps that are in Cuba.

I want to describe some of the direct and indirect tortures that the people of Cuba suffer. The little chair or little seat—this is a torture that Dr. Biscet described for you before. It is one that consists of handcuffing the hands of a prisoner behind his back and uniting them with another set of handcuffs that are at the prisoner’s feet.

They throw the prisoner on his side in the cold, wet, or humid floor during hours. At this time, he is easy prey for any insects who swarm in these dens of perdition—rats, mosquitoes, roaches. They do with these prisons whatever they like—these prisoners, sorry.

There is another torture that is called the crucifixion. It consists of handcuffing a prisoner completely naked, to the bars of the torture chamber with his arms open—exposed open in the form of a cross. To these prisoners, they throw water over their bodies in times of cold weather, and the mosquitos suck whatever blood they can.

I still have fresh in my mind the screams of the individual prisoners that were being tortured. I don’t know if one day I will be able to forget them. But these forms of torture are nothing compared to what I believe is the worst thing that happens in Cuban jails—the sadism, negligence, and the cruelty of the prison guards and officials that are in charge of the prisons in Cuba. They leave the prisoners to attack each other, so that they can demand the basic human rights that they should already be afforded.

Out of desperation, they inject urine or mixed feces into any part of their body. They sever fingers from their hands. They melt plastic onto their extremities. They make deep and long cuts with razor blades. And they even insert cold steel needles into their eyes. Most of them lose their lives, and others are injured for the rest of their days.

Honorable members of this committee, everything that I tell you, both about Cuban political prisoners, dissidents, peaceful opposition members both inside and outside of Cuba, independent journalists like me, and the true civil society of Cuba, we have denounced for many years to many international organizations of human rights defense. These organizations, knowing of our testimonies, they have implored for the respect of human rights in Cuba.

Mr. President, it is the time for Cuba. I strongly urge you to condemn this deplorable situation in which the fundamental rights of Cubans are being violated. Let us not permit for the best sons and daughters of our country to continue to be tortured and killed.

Without the international support for the peaceful opposition in Cuba, the Castro brothers will continue to repress their people, and they will end up massacring them, just like it is happening today with the people of Syria.

Please continue to support the dissident movement, the peaceful Cuban opposition, and the independent press, who with great courage face the totalitarian system that has asphyxiated us for 53 years. We Cubans are very conscious that we need to fix our own country's problems ourselves, but we need the help of the free world, and specifically your help, just as South Africa needed your help during its time.

Honorable members of this committee, and honorable members of the United States Congress of the United States of America, let us not forget that for Cuba this is the time.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hernández follows:]

Testimony of Mr. Normando Hernández González
Independent Journalist
Thursday, February 16, 2012
“House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights”

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Payne, and members of the subcommittee:

My name is Normando Hernández González, and I am a former prisoner of conscience from the cause of the 75, or what is also known as the Cuban Black Spring. In 2003, over the span of just 10 days, the Cuban government requested that I receive a life sentence, which in Cuba is considered the last alternative to being executed by a firing squad. On the eleventh day, in summary form, they gave me a trial, which concluded with a sentence of life in prison, and on the twelfth day, they sentenced me to 25 years of detainment, of which I completed 7 years and 4 months. My "crime"? To defend, with the tip of my pen, freedom of speech, press, thought, conscience. I was exiled to Spain in 2010 together with my wife and daughter after an agreement was reached between the governments of Cuba and Spain, and the Cuban Catholic Church.

Currently I am a Reagan-Fascell Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, but I am speaking in my personal capacity and the views expressed here are entirely my own.

At the outset, let me point out that the violence of Cuba's military junta against my countrymen increases every day. The Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an independent organization in Cuba, confirmed 631 arbitrary arrests in the month of January 2012, an increase of 135% in comparison with the same period last year when there were 268 arrests. In the streets, human rights defenders, especially women, are kicked and beaten by the political police, and, as was the case of Yris Tamara Pérez Aguilera, knocked unconscious due to blows to the head. The Ladies in White are also victims of repression. Many have reported that while detained, police strip them naked, shout obscenities at them, touch their genitals, and threaten to rape them.

We are mourning the death of dissident Juan Wilfredo Soto who, in May 2011, was kicked by a policeman to the point that he died two days later as a result of the beating. In October 2011, just 5 months after the death of Wilfredo Soto, they murdered the leader of the Ladies in White, Laura Pollan Toledo. It has been barely 28 days since the murder of prisoner of conscience Wilmar Villar Mendoza, following 50 days on a hunger strike. I say “murdered” because these deaths occurred under the custody of the state and were completely avoidable. Three dissidents killed in the last 8 months, only 90 miles from the most democratic country in the world.

Today, I condemn the Cuban military junta and call for justice for the martyrs and people of Cuba.

For my part, I was in four Cuban prisons. I entered prison as a completely healthy person, but now I live with the bacillus of pulmonary tuberculosis, irritable bowel syndrome, chondromalacia patellae in both knees and in the trachea. I also suffer from chronic depressive disorder with somatic symptoms, and I live without my gallbladder thanks to torture I suffered during my final two years in prison.

Today, however, I prefer not to talk more about myself, but rather, about those who are being tortured at this very moment. I want to speak not only of political prisoners, but also of the nearly 100,000 prisoners who live in poor, overcrowded conditions in the more than 250 prisons and labor camps that are in Cuba. I shall now describe some of the direct and indirect methods of torture to which Cuban prisoners are subjected.

In prisoner slang, the "guaguaita," or crucifixion, is a method of torture that consists of handcuffing the inmate, completely naked, with his back to the bars of the torture cell with arms open in the form of a cross. The prisoner is kept like this for hours, so that he is obliged to perform his bodily functions in such circumstances. In cold weather, the guards throw buckets of water in the early morning hours. Mosquitoes suck what little blood that can be heated.

The "sillita," or little seat, is another of the torture methods used by the guards of the Cuban regime. This involves both hands being handcuffed behind the prisoner's back and tied to another set of handcuffs fastened around the prisoners' feet. Lying sideways on the damp or wet dirt floor, the prisoners are left to remain there for hours. Rats, cockroaches, ants and all of the insects that swarm in these dens of perdition find the tortured prisoner to be easy prey. I still hear their screams of terror in my mind. I do not know if I can ever forget them.

But these torture methods are nothing compared with what I believe is the worst thing that happens in Cuban jails. The sadism, negligence, and cruelty of prison guards and officials, in addition to the more direct and indirect torture, leads the prisoners to attack themselves so that they can demand the basic rights that all prisoners should be afforded under the Cuban penitentiary system. Out of desperation, they inject oil or urine mixed with feces into any part of the body, sever fingers from their hands, swallow barbed wire, melt plastic on their upper and lower extremities, make deep, long cuts with razorblades, cutting their own tendons and veins, or even insert cold steel needles into their eyes. Many lose their lives; others are injured for the rest of their days.

Honorable members of this committee, together with other former Cuban political prisoners, dissidents, and the peaceful opposition movement in Cuba, in effect, the true Cuban civil society, everything that I have put forward here, we have reported for many years to international defenders of human rights, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the European Parliament, the United Nations, and many others. At different times, these institutions have used our testimony to demand full respect for human rights in Cuba.

Mr. Chairman, for Cuba, the time is now. I strongly urge you to condemn this deplorable situation in which the fundamental rights of Cubans are being violated. Let us not allow the best sons and daughters of our country to continue to be tortured and killed. Without international support for peaceful Cuban opposition, the Castro brothers will continue repressing the people of Cuba and will massacre them, just like what is happening today to the people of Syria. Let us support the dissident movement and the peaceful Cuban opposition who courageously challenges the totalitarian system that has asphyxiated us for 53 years. Cubans know that we must solve our country's problem ourselves, but we need the help of the free world, and specifically help from you all, just as South Africa needed help during its time.

Honorable Members of the United States Congress, let us not forget that for Cuba, the time is now.

Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Hernández, thank you very much for your absolutely compelling testimony, for reminding this committee that the sadism that is commonplace and prevalent in Cuban jails continues unabated, and for describing what is known as the “crucifixion” and the “little seat” and these other forms of sadistic behavior that so many political prisoners have suffered.

I would point out that every delegation, congressional delegation, lawmakers from other countries, they need to insist on going to the prisons. Frank Wolf, Congressman from Virginia, and I have tried repeatedly to go to Cuba—have been denied a visa each time—with the express purpose of going to the prisons. The International Committee for the Red Cross has tried repeatedly to go and investigate comprehensively the prisons and the mistreatment of prisoners in Cuba, and they have been denied.

So to those who come back to the United States after visiting with Fidel Castro and Raul and others, as the Congressional Black Caucus did when some seven members traveled down, I and others gave them information similar, but not identical, to what you have conveyed to us today and said, “Please raise these issues.” And they didn’t. As a matter of fact, they came back and gushed about how impressed they were by Raul and Fidel Castro. They were kind men and nice men, and these are the kind of things that they impose upon political prisoners.

I would point out that the Cuban Government ratified the Torture Convention in 1995. This is obviously torture, degrading and cruel, as you have pointed out. It is time for the U.N. to do even more to hold them to account.

So since I got to ask questions before, I would like to yield to Mr. Sires and my other colleagues for questions that they might have.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Hernández, thank you very much for being here. I met you once before, and I have been very impressed ever since I met you—your courage and your determination.

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. Gracias.

Mr. SIRES. You know, one of the things that people point out—and you alluded to this—you know, they say that, well, there are only 200 political prisoners, or there are only 120 political prisoners. Yes, but they arrest 631 in 1 month, 268 of the others?

And it is what I keep telling people—that they may characterize you as a political prisoner, but there are other thousands of people who have been arrested for political reasons, who are expressing themselves. Can you comment to that?

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. Yes. First, with your permission, I wanted to say thank you so much for your opinion of me, your good opinion of me. But, first, I want to respond to Congressman Smith why these people who go to Cuba come back with this image.

The problem is that Cuba is not just one alone; there are many Cubas. There is one Cuba for tourists, there is one Cuba for people who go for an official visit, there is one Cuba for regular prisoners, the criminals, and one Cuba for prisoners of political conscience.

There is another Cuba for government representatives, and there is one Cuba—the one that suffers—of the general Cuban public. That is why every time that someone goes to Cuba I recommend that they don’t accept that the government conduct their visit for

them or plan their visit for them, but to have autonomy. And that is why these people come back so misinformed.

Congressman Sires, to talk about the list of prisoners in Cuba is to minimize the situation. I have to say that there are more than 11 million people who are prisoners in Cuba, because Cuba itself is a prison.

But if we are going to be more specific, we can go to LEI 61 or the civil and penal code in Cuba. In Title 11 of the civil and penal code, there is a stipulation of someone being dangerous to the government. This means that someone doesn't have to commit a real offense in order to be taken into prison. Today people who are taken into prison or sanctioned under this law, there exists about 5,000 in Cuba.

Mr. SMITH. I have just been informed that Dr. Biscet is back on the line, so, Mr. Sires, if you have a question for—

Mr. SIRES. Dr. Biscet, this is Albio Sires. I just want to inform you that I just spoke to our Chairman Smith, and we are going to send a letter to the Pope, in the hopes that the Pope will take time when he goes to Cuba and meets with you.

Dr. BISCET. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Mr. SIRES. Now, Dr. Biscet, are you concerned now when you leave to go home that you are going to be arrested?

Dr. BISCET. Everything is possible. It could happen at any time because we are under constant supervision.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you.

Ms. SCHMIDT. Yes, thank you, Dr. Biscet. This is Congresswoman Jean Schmidt from Ohio. You mentioned your fear that there would soon be more problems with Cuba and the United States, similar to the Cuban missile crisis in the 1960s. Could you elaborate?

Dr. BISCET. It is common knowledge that the Cuban Government has made strategic alliances with Venezuela, with other countries, in order to be dangerous toward the American public. We believe that because of the closeness of Cuba to the United States that that proximity creates a problem.

These alliances with Iran and Venezuela, these are countries that have clearly stated that they are enemies for the United States, and that the fear comes from these alliances.

Ms. SCHMIDT. Dr. Biscet, would these strikes be in the nature of chemical, biological, or nuclear warfare?

Dr. BISCET. Cuba has developed biological and chemical weapons.

In this case, I am only talking about nuclear missiles.

Ms. SCHMIDT. You are thinking nuclear?

Dr. BISCET. Yes.

Ms. SCHMIDT. Dr. Biscet, one follow up, is this your personal belief, or do you have evidence to support your belief?

Dr. BISCET. It is my conclusion from the information that is general in the international community but also from what I have derived from the communications within Cuba.

Ms. SCHMIDT. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Rivera.

Mr. RIVERA. [Speaks in Spanish.] Mr. Chairman, I am just telling Dr. Biscet how honored it is for me to speak with him today, and express mine and the appreciation of all freedom-loving people for

the great sacrifices that he has suffered in Cuba on behalf of the cause of a free and democratic Cuba.

[Asks questions in Spanish.] Mr. Chairman, I am asking Dr. Biscet what he sees could happen after the Pope's visit, the upcoming visit, and if he can foresee any change with respect to what will be happening with the opposition movement, the dissident leaders, the human rights activists, inside Cuba.

Dr. BISCET. We are hoping that we will receive spiritual support, but in the political camp we fear that there is not going to be a very positive result for the Cuban people. The last time that John Paul II was here they were developing various civil and penal laws in order to continue to repress the Cuban people.

Mr. RIVERA. [Asks questions in Spanish.] Mr. Chairman, I am asking what the perspective is of the human rights activists and the opposition leaders. With respect to Raul and Fidel being in charge right now, what is their expectations for the future under the regime right now?

Dr. BISCET. We are confident that there will be no change and no benefits for the people with the two brothers there. But we also know that we cannot wait for someone to die to create change. So we will create change on our own. We are hoping that we will have the capacity to create non-violent coercion and pressure in order to actually install that political change ourselves.

Mr. RIVERA. Mr. Hernández González?

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. I want to send a great hug to my friend and my brother, Dr. Biscet. It is very sad for the history of my country in order that there has to be the death of the individual who is martyring the people in order to create a change. That is why today the civic, non-violent opposition in Cuba is going from passive to active.

And there are many organizations all over Cuba that are taking the space that has been prohibited to these organizations along the span of this regime in Cuba. I speak about this space in the public square, and there are a lot of people with a lot of courage and intelligence who are putting all of their efforts into getting rid of this totalitarian regime.

Among them, we have Dr. Biscet today speaking to us. We have Arturo Garcia Perez Santoni; on the front of organization for civic movement, Mr. Tamayo; we have Mr. Garcia in the part of Santiago in Cuba. And I am not going to continue because the list would be interminable.

But we have to be conscious of the fact that all of these people that are on the streets, taking the risk of losing their liberty and losing their lives, need the support of all of us, and mostly of this Congress.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. Turner.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you. I applaud and admire your patriotism, your courage, and determination to shine the light, Dr. Biscet and Mr. Hernández. I wonder about, particularly as a journalist, and you, Doctor, the press, both in the United States and Europe, lack the outrage that I think is necessary to help bring the pressure on here. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. It needs to be recognized of the Cuban Government that it has a campaign of propaganda for itself. And, unfortunately, we haven't been able to be intelligent enough to create a counterpropaganda the way that it should be. Unfortunately, the people who have the power to create the most pressure against the Cuban Government are not really conscious of what is really happening in Cuba, because they speak English.

And, unfortunately, the press that is controlled, mostly because of the left, they are romantics, don't give the necessary coverage, both in context and comprehensively, that the Cuban cause needs to create a true conscience to the people who can create this pressure for the Cuban Government.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Marino?

[No response.]

Yes, Mr. Rivera.

Mr. RIVERA. If I could followup, Chairman. [Asks questions in Spanish.] Mr. Chairman, I am asking Dr. Biscet what he feels about what seems to be a new practice by the Cuban dictatorship to, instead of imprisoning activists for decades or years long, to arrest them for days or weeks or months and release them—an arrest and release policy. [Asks questions in Spanish.]

Dr. BISCET. We have been suffering this change in policy for a very long time, in the way that they arrest people. It is a form of terror and political pressure for the individuals on the island. It may be imprisonment for a short amount of time, but it has lasting effects. This amount of fear has created a sense of tired—has made the people very, very tired, and has had the chilling effect that the government has tried to—has intended to make.

Either way, individuals in Cuba still don't have freedom of association, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, all of these liberties that we enjoy here in the United States. And I am hoping that we will be able to impose this change in our society.

Mr. RIVERA. Gracias, Dr. Biscet. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. Before we close—

Dr. BISCET. We are hoping that we will have the help of all of the individuals who love liberty. We need to create this change to stop this great threat that has existed in Cuba for over 50 years. That is why I am proposing this massive non-violent resistance to be able to impulse this change.

But, first, it would be much more effective if the international community that loves liberty would be willing to support us in creating this change. We have many examples in the international community of individual people who were able to create this change and create a true resistance to their tyrannic governments.

Mr. SMITH. Let me just conclude. Earlier this week I chaired a hearing on human rights abuse in China, and back in 1994 when Bill Clinton de-linked trade from human rights, there were people on both sides of the aisle who thought somehow that would very quickly morph into political and religious freedoms and human rights freedoms.

None of that happened. It has gotten demonstrably worse. And people who were for that will now say, at least privately, that de-linking human rights from trade was a horrific mistake. There are

some who say we need to provide unilateral concessions to the Cubans, to the Cuban Government.

And, Mr. Hernández, you might want to take this question. I myself have offered amendments in the past in the Congress that would have lifted the travel ban if, and only if, political prisoners were released and free and fair elections were held. Your thoughts on the conditionality of human rights and any concessions toward the government by the Obama administration, how important it is to have those conditions?

I would just add to that, before you answer, that this flawed assumption not only has played out with regards to China, which has become a brutal dictatorship where torture is endemic, but it has also played out more recently in Vietnam when a bilateral trade agreement was agreed to between the United States and Vietnam.

Almost to the day after they got their bilateral trade agreement, they began a serious crackdown on dissidents and religious defenders. Trade without human rights conditions has become a lifeline to the dictatorship. Mr. Hernández, your thoughts?

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. Any type of pressure, all the pressure that you can create against a totalitarian system will advance democracy and freedom to that country. But these pressures need to be united to support in all aspects of the word to the dissidents and opposition that exist within that country.

Mr. SMITH. I believe we have lost Dr. Biscet again—the connection. So if my colleagues have anything further they would like to add?

[No response.]

Mr. Hernández, any final thoughts that you would like to add before we conclude?

Mr. HERNÁNDEZ. Yes. I want to thank you, Congressman Smith, to the Congressmen here present, and the subcommittee in general. And I want to remind you—I don't want this to become a theme, but I do want to remind you that the time for Cuba is now.

Mr. SMITH. On that profound sentiment, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:55 p.m., the subcommittees were adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X



MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD

**JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515-0128

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, AND HUMAN RIGHTS
Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
Connie Mack (R-FL), Chairman**

February 14, 2012

You are respectfully requested to attend a joint OPEN hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere to be held in **Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live, via the WEBCAST link on the Committee website at <http://www.hcfa.house.gov>)**:

DATE: Thursday, February 16, 2012

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Further Human Rights Violations in Castro's Cuba: the Continued Abuse of Political Prisoners

WITNESSES: Panel I
The Honorable Dan Burton
Member of Congress

Panel II
Oscar Elias Biscet, M.D.
Human rights advocate
Former Cuban political prisoner

Mr. Normando Hernández González
Independent journalist
Former Political Prisoner – Group of 75

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights and Western Hemisphere HEARING

Day Thursday Date February 16, 2012 Room 2172 Rayburn

Starting Time 2:00 p.m. Ending Time 3:55 p.m.

Recesses 0 (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Rep. Chris Smith

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session [x]
Executive (closed) Session []
Televised [x]

Electronically Recorded (taped) [x]
Stenographic Record [x]

TITLE OF HEARING:

Further Human Rights Violations in Castro's Cuba: the Continued Abuse of Political Prisoners

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

AGHHR: Rep. Chris Smith, Rep. Tom Marino, Rep. Robert Turner
WIEM: Rep. Jean Schmidt, Rep. Eliot Engel, Rep. David Rivera, Rep. Albio Sires

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

Rep. Dan Burton

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes [x] No []
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

Prepared statement from Rep. Mack
Prepared statement from Rep. Buerkle
Questions for the Record from Rep. Buerkle

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE
or
TIME ADJOURNED 3:55 p.m.

Handwritten signature of Subcommittee Staff Director

Congressman Connie Mack
Chairman
Western Hemisphere Subcommittee
Further Human Rights Violations in Castro's Cuba: the Continued Abuse of Political Prisoners
Opening Statement

No matter what the Obama administration tells you, Cuba currently is not a good place to visit.

In Cuba, citizens are jailed for speaking out against the regime. In Cuba, during a two day crackdown in 2003, 75 human rights activists became political prisoners. In Cuba, freedom advocates are targeted, followed, watched and harassed. As Mr. Gonzalez will confirm today – brutal prison sentences await you for criticizing the Castro's management and citizen services. And if you make it out of jail, you probably won't be allowed to stay in your own country. In Cuba, political prisoners go on hunger strikes so that someone, anyone, will hear their voice.

These prisoners die protesting against the regime.

In Cuba, like in 1996 – U.S. citizens and humanitarians are shot down from the sky. In Cuba, Dr. Biscet, our other brave witness today, was jailed and beaten for protesting a lack of freedom. Along with Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, I nominated Dr. Biscet for the Noble Peace Prize. And in Cuba today, Alan Gross, a U.S. citizen helping the cause of freedom, is currently suffering under a 15 year sentence.

Back in 2005, in my first year in Congress, I warned of the Castro-Chavez alliance. I explained that a Venezuelan military officer described the relationship as a - "clear and precise expansion of the communist revolution directed by Fidel Castro". I encouraged my colleagues to stand for liberty – and oppose the cancerous alliance between Castro and Chavez.

Almost seven years later, the U.S. is spending approximately 100 million dollars a day on Chavez's oil, and Chavez sends his country's oil to Cuba – keeping the Castros afloat. Despite announcements of the "democratization" of Cuban society, we see that things are much worse in Cuba and Hugo Chavez is running Venezuela into the ground.

Correa in Ecuador has adopted an even more sophisticated Cuban model. Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina, and I worry Peru, look toward Cuba- A Cuba that has denied Cubans the same freedoms for **53 years**.

Today political prisoners across the world are standing up for freedom – including U.S. citizens. Alan Gross and the 19 Americans under attack from Egypt are just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, Obama is turning his back on these U.S. freedom workers.

Currently, U.S. foreign policy with Latin America is backward. The goal has been - reach out to enemies – turn our back on friends. This Administration has abandoned U.S. citizen Alan Gross in prison while making concessions to corrupt regimes with no positive results. Once upon a time, the United States commanded respect around the world and could work with our allies to stand up for freedom. Today our allies have learned not to rely upon us and freedom fighters languish in jail.

Cuba, a State Sponsor of Terrorism located just 90 miles from Florida, is sponsoring terrorism – denying human rights – and harboring dozens of FBI fugitives; While the Obama Administration is easing travel and remittances, aiding in oil drilling, and engaging the regime. Every bit of training and every U.S. travel dollar props up the Cuban regime.

The honorable Armando Valladares, who has suffered much under the Castro regime, said it best: "Man is Nature's most wonderful creature. Torturing him, crushing him, murdering him for his beliefs and ideas is more than a violation of human rights-it is a crime against all humanity." Ronald Reagan honored Cuban prisoners like Valladares., President Obama has failed these heroes by neither leading nor following, now all we ask is that he gets out of the way of those fighting for freedom.

REPRESENTATIVE ANN MARIE BUERKLE

Opening Statement

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you also to our witnesses for appearing here today to discuss this extremely important issue.

Over the last two years, President Obama has attempted a conciliatory approach to Cuba. He has negotiated with a country that has clearly demonstrated an aggressive animosity toward America. He has softened America's policy toward our southern neighbor, only to discover that Castro's Cuba is not interested in working with America any more than it has been for the last half century.

The Cuban government has shown that it continues to be hostile not only to American values, but to the values of all free societies. The Cuban government has done nothing to loosen its grip on its oppressed people. As our brave witness will attest, the Castro regime is as ruthless as ever.

As a nation vehemently opposed to human rights violations, America cannot make an exception to Castro's Cuba. America should not treat the current Cuban government as if it is willing to compromise. America must recognize that Cuba is set in its ways – it is a country desperately in need of a new government and a new way forward.

The time has come to abandon our conciliatory attitude to the Castro regime. We must stand with those Cubans who have stood up against totalitarian government and with all the Cubans we have welcomed to America in condemning Castro's Cuba for what it is: an oppressive and antiquarian regime that we cannot and must not tolerate.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses. It is vital that the truth about Cuban civil and human rights abuses is made known. And it is vital that America acknowledge the reality in Cuba and look for a way forward.

Thank you, Madam Chairman. I yield back my time.



REPRESENTATIVE ANN MARIE BUERKLE

Opening Statement Questions

1. To Mr. Gonzalez:

There is a great divide in this country between those who know what is going on in Cuba and those who don't. Sadly, those who don't seem to be entirely uninterested in knowing the truth. What do you believe is the best way to share your experiences with this part of the American population?

2. To the witnesses:

Clearly the suffering of its citizens – even to the point of hunger strikers dying in prison – has not softened Cuba's harsh regime. What do you believe it will take to bring about true change in Cuba? What can Cubans do on the ground in Cuba? What can Cuban-Americans do?



Normando Hernández

4/16/2012

"Further Human Rights Violations in Castro's Cuba: The Continued Abuse of Political Prisoners,"

U.S. House of Representatives, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights and Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, February 16, 2012

1. Unfortunately it is as you say. It is true that there exists a large division in this country between those who know and those who do not, as well as those who are not interested in knowing the truth about what is going on in Cuba. However, this could change if the defenders of freedom and democracy for the Cuban people were able to have access to the main, English speaking mass media in the United States. There are many Cuban professionals and intellectuals, even inside Cuba that would be happy to share their experiences with the American people if they had the opportunity to talk to the main media outlets in this country. On the other hand, there are different ways to share our experiences with the American people, either through lectures, discussion forums, awareness campaigns for the freedom and democracy for the people of Cuba and any type of direct or indirect contact that one can establish with people in Cuba, in order to share our experiences or discuss what is really going on. The English translation of books, testimonies, letters, denunciations, journals, etc. written by prisoners of conscience inside of Cuban prisons, as well as by the different human rights groups, political parties, or civilian movements would be excellent.
2. In order to achieve real change in Cuba, we need the world to gain awareness about what is happening in Cuba. Cubans are aware that we must solve our own problems, but we need the help of the free world. Cubans are living in a defining moment and today more than ever we need an international consensus to bring about real change for freedom and democracy for the Cuban people, and prevent that our country, in a period of transition, be hijacked by those who have implemented a totalitarian system for more than half a century. International recognition of the work by dissidents and those who oppose totalitarianism prevailing in Cuba, as well as the international condemnations and sanctions towards the only western totalitarian regime would be steps that would turn on the lights of freedom and democracy for the 11.2 million people inside of Cuba. Cubans for more than 53 years have been opposing the government that oppresses them. Today's methods of passive and active nonviolent struggles are utilized by those that fight inside Cuba. The denunciations and condemnations by Cuban dissidents and opponents, through independent journalism, about the violations of the inalienable rights of people, abuses, assaults, torture, state terrorism, and murder that the government of the Castro brothers committed with impunity against peaceful dissidents and opponents, as well as demonstrations in the street, are some of the actions that have become increasingly visible within the country. Different human rights organizations, political parties, civilian movements etc. work hard to break the walls of censorship and take to the streets and public spaces within Cuba. They need to bring information to Cubans, make it participatory and inclusive, to empower citizens so that through their own self-management, are able to control the environment around them rather than continue to be subject to it. Disgracefully, any person from anywhere in the world knows more about Cuba and the Cuban people, than do Cubans living inside the island. Not only Cuban-Americans, but all Cubans everywhere must seek common ground and devise strategies to help each other to achieve freedom and democracy for our suffering people. I think

that it would be great to create a parliament of the Cuban exile community, where the exile community can represent the dissidents inside of Cuba, the opposition on the island and the Cuban people in general. Through this body, the Cuban people can plan out specific strategies and undertake concrete actions towards freedom and democracy for the Cuban people.