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Families Torn Apart: Human Rights and U.S. Restrictions on Cuban-American Travel

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify before you today.

This hearing has limited its focus on the lifting of travel restrictions which I would like to remind this Committee, were imposed on Cuba's military regime in 2004 after the massive arrests which sent to prison 75 men and women, members of Cuba's peaceful opposition.

Let me begin by stating some facts: Three days before the arrival of hurricane Gustave, Cuba's Central Bank advised its creditors that its external debt for 2007 had increased \$1,100 million dollars of the already existing \$16,500 million, which of course they were unwilling to pay. It is a fact that Cuba's economy was in ruins before the arrival of hurricanes Gustav and Ike, not because of an embargo from the United States. But because of the ineptitude of a regime that despite a huge subsidy from the Soviet Union which lasted for decades, spent it, not for the benefit of the Cuban people, but rather on repression and the financing and training of subversive groups, which make no mistake, are still spreading violence around the world today.

Another fact, on three occasions now Cuba has refused the generous offer of humanitarian aid from the US. It initially said that no DART team would be allowed because no other countries had made the same requests. Their statements were clearly misleading because at the same time they were saying this, Venezuelan and Mexican inspectors were in Cuba evaluating the damages. In their refusal of humanitarian aid from the United States, they include and were apparently pleased by Barak Obama's politically motivated request for the suspension of travel sanctions during 90 days. Last but not least, they stated they would not accept donations, but certainly the lifting of the embargo for a period of six months so that they could obtain credits. That is the key word, credits so that they can determine what to buy, and who it goes to. Credit that they will not pay back, just as they have not paid any of their existing and long list of creditors. Only this time U.S. taxpayers will end up bearing the burden.

Many of us do not understand why some Members are considering the lifting of sanctions to a regime that has not shown the least interest in releasing political prisoners, showing respect for human rights or holding free and democratic elections after 48 years of Fidel Castro's iron rule? When Congressman Delahunt visited Cuba in December 2006, he called it "a new era." Raul Castro had just been named successor *without elections*. Two years later, the "new era" is the same dictatorship, only with a different Castro at the helm, still enslaving the Cuban people.

Don't the Cuban people deserve the same inalienable rights other free nations enjoy or is the United States Congress going to allow itself to become an accomplice to a dictatorship that has failed its people yet again and now in their darkest hour?

But let's go back to the facts for a moment. Family travel, considering the high cost of passport and fare to Cuba *is not a solution to the needs of eleven million Cubans*, of

which a large majority, does not have relatives abroad. Who will care for those which remain hostages of an irresponsible government that has not and cannot guarantee them their basic needs in this time of tragedy?

Those who are here today advocating for the lifting of sanctions, should instead be urging the international community to pressure the regime into accepting the free aid by the United States and distributed by reputable international organizations as was the case of Burma? The United States Congress should be standing by the side of the victims, and not wanting to embolden the victimizers. It is demagoguery to preach that relatives will be able to afford the high cost of travel, not to mention that the lack of infrastructure in Cuba makes it practically impossible for even disaster experts to reach the remote and devastated areas throughout the island. And it is unrealistic to think that relatives will be able to carry construction materials which for that matter, are already permitted under the Agriculture Exception and Cuba can purchase from the U.S.

Unfortunately, some of those who now claim they want to travel to Cuba as often as possible, are the same who misled our government when arriving to our shores brought in by smuggling rings on speed boats, or who cross the Mexican border and fill out asylum petitions, alleging persecution benefiting from the Cuban Adjustment Act and within a year's time after obtaining their permanent residence, are back in Cuba as visitors.

Lifting the travel ban will not solve the problems of eleven million Cubans. It will only reward a Regime that has shown no willingness to change. Even during this time of suffering.

It is ironic that some of those prisoners, members of the 75, for whose arrests the travel sanctions were imposed, have been released only to advocate for the lifting of those same sanctions. We should take a moment today to remember that *over 50* of those 75 still remain in prison today under inhuman conditions. Normando Hernandez is one of the 75, his mother joins us here today, and her message is clear: do not bail out a regime that is holding her son captive.

The Cuban people today are no different from hostages held by Colombia's FARC. They are captives of a rogue government that has been unable to provide and care for them. Don't give in to the victimizers or the economic interests of a travel industry that exploits and feeds on families who are torn, not by policy but by a ruthless dictatorship. There are eleven million Cubans who are suffering the consequences of 50 years of abuse by this Regime. Travel to Cuba, before the 2004 policy changes did not bring about democratic reform as Congressman Delahunt claims.

This is the same regime that for years has harbored fugitives of U.S. justice, the same regime that has imprisoned thousands of men and women, the same regime that has killed American citizens in international airspace, the same regime that has sunk tugboats in the bay of Havana with children on board, the survivors of the horrible crime testified before this same Committee. In May of 2001, before an audience of American haters at the University of Teheran, Fidel Castro, to the chant of war, war, from the fanatics in the

audience, threatened that the governments of Cuba and Iran could bring the United States to it's knees. Four months later the American people awoke to the horrors of September 11. Today, Fidel Castro's brainchild Hugo Chavez is subverting order in the continent.

The Cuban people need solidarity to put and end to 50 years of tyranny, they do not need the Congress of the United States to give economic support to the tyrant that oppresses them.

Adolf Hitler was able to murder 6 million Jews, while apologists found excuses to justify his crimes. It is no different in Cuba. The Castro regime wants the lifting of family travel to eventually, and they expressed it as such, obtain the lifting of tourism travel to Cuba. Will that benefit the Cuban people? No it will benefit the regime and especially the Armed Forces who run the tourism industry. Cuba needs solidarity, not apologists.

Mr Chairman, Cuba, the country I was born in, is devastated, as I testify here today the destruction will not be solved by lifting sanctions, but by international pressure to accept massive humanitarian aid and I urge you to use the power of your Committee to also pressure Cuban Authorities to accept this much needed aid. Please, do not ignore the "ever approaching sound of thunder" that as Anne Frank warned from her loneliness, eventually would destroy her.