

Statement of Miriam Leiva

Independent Journalist and founding member of the Ladies in White

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Ladies and gentlemen:

Oscar Espinosa Chepe and I appreciate this occasion to express our views concerning the very important issue to Americans and Cubans within our island nation and in exile that you are considering today. We fully support lifting travel ban to Americans to visit Cuba.

I assume you know we have been dedicating our lives in the past 17 years to promoting the wellbeing of our people through human rights activism. Oscar is an independent economist and journalist, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison during the 2003 crackdown on 75 peaceful individuals who intended to express their opinions and were unjustly charged of jeopardizing state security as mercenaries of the United States. He was granted conditional release due to his very poor health, but can be returned to jail at any moment, since he cannot write or talk openly, yet continues to do so. I am also an independent journalist and when he was imprisoned I was one of the founders of the Ladies in White movement for the release of the 75, until last year when I decided to focus on writing and directly assisting the prisoners and their families. I have been advised that I could be taken to prison too, so I try to do my best to using the time I have out here just in case.

To know the developments in a country and its people, to exchange ideas and experiences, to disseminate democratic traditions it is essential to be there. Citizens of almost all countries find traveling commonplace, except for Americans and Cubans, although we are only separated by the short distance of the Florida Straits. The comprehensive links forged by generations, which intertwined our history through commerce, science, culture, music, sports, dreams and families, have suffered a great deal during the last five decades of estrangement.

It is very difficult to understand that in the last eight years the United States has become Cuba's principal food supplier and fifth largest trading partner, but Americans cannot walk our streets and chat with our people. Only recently we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It should be recalled that the Iron Curtain started to be opened by millions of Westerners visiting the countries beyond it. East Germans, for instance, were shocked by the economic benefits of their peers; free trade and technology provided by the German Federal Republic astonished the country with the best living standard in the Soviet bloc, discrediting the propaganda of the "real socialism". We are grateful to the visionary politicians who carried out the "Policy towards the East", that helped create the conditions for the swift and peaceful outcome. Americans played a significant role. Today you have a similar opportunity regarding Cuba.

We are aware of the concern of many distinguished Congresswomen and men over the financial impact of American tourism on Cuban economy, fearing the possibility of giving breath to the totalitarian regime. We have been thinking about the odds for many years, and the developments have led us without any doubt to believe that many thousands of Americans visiting Cuba would

benefit our society, and hence our people. Firstly through the free flows of ideas, and further by pressing the government to open up self-employment to provide goods and services, such as renting rooms because the capacities in the hotels would be surpassed. It would improve the impoverished living standards, far more critical today than in the 1990's when some were allowed. Everyone will know that amelioration did not come from the State, but from Americans. Cuban authorities have closed all private initiative to tie the people economically, as a means to have them politically dependent.

Of course American visitors would spend money, collected by the Cuban government, but it is so inefficient that would only be able to keep small amounts; very little to cover its great needs. It is incapable of producing the scarce and low quality food sold to our nationals, and has to buy more than 80% abroad. Where? Mostly in the United States. Right now it is impressive to find so many American products in our very limited supplied stores. No competition from any other country is possible in face of quality, and the proximity that stimulates trade in many ways. Imagine then the return of the money Americans spend, through purchases from American farmers and other businessmen in order to supply hotels, restaurants, and stores. In the short run many other possibilities would flourish.

Cuban authorities have blamed the American embargo for the great economic problems existing in our country, and deceived national and international public opinion by expressing desire of its lifting. In fact, they have used the embargo to justify all their wrongdoings, economic inefficiency, mismanagement, and repression. They fear losing that alibi, just as they panic at the idea of having no excuse to prevent Americans from coming in. In spite of the propaganda and manipulation about what goes on beyond our tight sea boundaries, most Cubans find ways to know, are eager to listen, have lost faith in the unfulfilled promises, are exhausted by daily shortages, and do not foresee a decent future.

After 50 years of being locked away from the world, Cuban society is on the cusp of changes. It is not a matter of natural generational decay, but the exhaustion of a system that has fallen into a deep economic, political and social crisis, with no solution other than deep changes. They might come from the power structure, aware of their inevitability, or from the people out of desperation, as well as civil commitment. They could be in a velvet fashion or in turmoil with great repression. We strive for understanding among all Cubans, for advancing democracy in a civilized and peaceful manner. We are positive that less tension in the relations between Cuba and the United States will favor our goals.

In a country where it is impossible for most citizens to have Internet at home, we cannot dream of communicating with Americans in that common instant way nowadays in most parts of the world, nor could anyone be able to experience developments if he does not set foot on our land. This year we enjoyed an art exhibition from New York, but we could not have the pleasure of New York Philharmonic Orchestra's performance. Many scholars, scientists, businessmen, entrepreneurs, farmers, sportsmen, politicians, and common people were not able interact. Americans and Cubans have to stand up to the twenty first century and restart our walks together, respecting the rights of our peoples, facilitating the path towards democracy, being proactive.

We hope to greet you soon in Havana, when all Americans could visit Cuba.

Thank you.