



WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

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Hearing on
“U.S.-Cuba Policy”

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My name is Geoff Thale, and I am the Program Director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). I founded WOLA's program on U.S. Cuba policy in 1995, and I have directed it since. I have accompanied four Congressional delegations to Cuba, traveled to the island more than a dozen times, and have written and spoken extensively about Cuba itself and about U.S. Cuba policy. I have worked professionally on issues of human rights, democracy, and development in Latin America for more than twenty years. I appreciate this opportunity to testify about U.S. policy toward Cuba before the Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade.

The Washington Office on Latin America is a U.S. non-profit, non-governmental organization that promotes human rights, democracy, and social justice by working with partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to shape policies in the U.S. and abroad. Since 1974, WOLA has monitored issues of human rights and democracy in Latin America, and has provided information and analysis to Congressional offices, the Administration, and the general public about conditions in the region and the impact of U.S. policy.

This hearing focuses on whether relaxing current Cuba travel and trade restrictions would advance U.S. economic objectives, as well as democracy and human rights in Cuba. At the height of Cold War hostility, the United States imposed a trade embargo on Cuba that prevented most trade, travel, and diplomatic contact. It is clear that the world has changed significantly since that time, and yet our embargo remains in place.

Today, we believe that the U.S. embargo on Cuba hurts domestic U.S. economic and political interests, without bringing us any foreign policy benefits (it also imposes restrictions on U.S. citizens' freedom to travel—restrictions that our government imposes on our citizens in relation to Cuba and to no other country in the world). WOLA believes that it is the interest of the United States to take steps to end the embargo and move toward unrestricted travel, and normal trade and diplomatic relations. There is no question that increased trade would be economically beneficial to the United States. In the context of normal trade and diplomatic relations, in which we are actually talking to Cuba and have some potential influence with them because of our trade and engagement, we will also be in a better position to raise concerns about human rights and democratization that we cannot meaningfully raise today.

I am an analyst and human rights advocate by profession. As several of my fellow panelists will lay out in some detail the economic benefits of removing restrictions on sales to Cuba, I will focus my remarks first on the relationship between U.S. policy toward Cuba and human rights on the island, and then on the implications our policy has in the larger U.S. - Latin America context.

Human Rights in Cuba and U.S. Ability to Influence Cuba

It is easy to fall into stereotypes in talking about human rights in Cuba. Friends and sympathizers of Cuba will talk about the social accomplishments—low infant mortality levels, high literacy rates, universal education and health care programs—that have been achieved in a poor Caribbean country. Foes of the Cuban government will talk about political prisoners, restrictions on freedom of speech, and the long tenure of the Castro brothers.

For WOLA, it is important to be clear about the real and serious human rights problems that exist in Cuba today; these problems shouldn't be whitewashed. At the same time, the human rights situation in Cuba should not be exaggerated or distorted to serve political purposes. As the State Department's annual human rights report notes, Cuba is a one party state, which restricts freedom of speech and freedom of association. Political parties, beyond the Cuban Communist Party, are barred by the Cuban constitution, and activists in other political parties can be arrested. In April of 2008, for example, a spokesperson for the small "Independent Movement for an Alternative Option" was charged with the crime of "social dangerousness" and sentenced to four years in prison. Cuba holds political prisoners—about two hundred currently, according to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation—about half of whom are classified by our colleagues at Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience. A group of seventy-five political activists and dissidents were arrested in 2003; though more than twenty of them have been paroled or given medical release, fifty-three remain in prison. Some of these prisoners were convicted in trials that fell short of internationally recognized standards of due process and impartiality.

In February of this year, Cuban prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo, imprisoned after a meeting with political dissidents in 2003, died after waging an 85-day hunger strike over prison conditions. His death highlights the problems of Cuba's prison system and the government's power to detain citizens

for politically-motivated reasons and without meaningful judicial recourse. It reminds us of the depth of frustration and helplessness that so many Cubans feel. These practices are simply unacceptable; the U.S. government and human rights community should continue calling on Cuba to end these immediately.

Cuba regularly violates certain internationally accepted norms about human rights and the rule of law, but the picture is not uniformly bleak. The U.S. State Department human rights report says that the Cuban government and its agents were not responsible for politically motivated killings or politically motivated disappearances, a problem in other countries in this hemisphere. It does not identify cases of extrajudicial executions by police or other security officials, a practice we see in Central America, and in Colombia, where military officials have been charged with kidnapping young men, dressing them in guerrilla fatigues, and killing them to make their body count statistics better.

On the other side, Cuba's accomplishments in the areas of health and education are significant. Though the Cuban government's ability to provide these services has come under significant strain in the past several years, the gains Cuba has made in these areas should not be lightly dismissed and are especially striking in a country whose per capita income is only about one fifth that of the United States.

What this portrait of Cuba suggests is that it is a country with serious human rights problems, but also with some real social achievements. Cuba ought to end its restrictions on political parties, its limits on freedom of speech and association, its continuing detention of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, and its problems with judicial independence. The United States and the international community ought to play a coordinated and constructive role in pressing Cuba to resolve its human rights problems.

Unfortunately, under current policy, the United States is relegated to the sidelines. With little travel and trade, and limited diplomatic contacts, we can be ignored by Cuba. We have none of the contacts, relationships, or tools of soft power with which to influence Cuba. Over the next few years, power in Cuba will pass to a younger generation. We have almost no contact with the academics, government officials, religious leaders, and others who will participate in our influence the next generation of leaders in Cuba.

Our focus has instead been to use, and according to a 2006 GAO report, at times, abuse, close to \$100 million in taxpayer dollars to privatize democracy promotion efforts in Cuba.

Instead of simply allowing American faith organizations, cultural groups and students to visit Cuba and interact organically with the Cuban people, the United States attempts to promote democracy through the “back door” in Cuba. Sadly, the recent detention in Cuba of American USAID sub-contractor Alan Gross illustrates the futility and risk involved with such an ill-conceived approach. WOLA strongly condemns the detention of Mr. Gross and has and will continue to urge the Cuban Government to release him immediately.

The approach that I have outlined here—one that moves toward normal trade and travel relations, and diplomatic ties, while raising our human rights concerns in that context—is the strategy that most of the world employs in its relationship with Cuba. Cuba has normal trade and diplomatic relations with all of Europe, with all of Latin America (the last two countries to normalize relations—Costa Rica and El Salvador—did so in recent months), with Israel and most of the Middle East, and with Africa and Asia.

Some countries, of course, engage in trade and investment without any human rights dialogue. Venezuela, Cuba’s leading trade partner, has never been reported to engage in human rights or democracy discussions with Cuba. China, Cuba’s number two trade partner, with bilateral trade topping \$2.6 billion a year, is unlikely to dialogue about human rights. But a number of countries, especially Spain and Brazil, have expanded trade and investment relations with Cuba in recent years, and raised human rights concerns in the context of the developing relationship.

Last January, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited Cuba and offered Cuba \$1 billion in credit for food, road building, nickel mining and other development projects. President Lula is also widely reported to have talked with Cuban leaders about the release of political prisoners and other human rights issues. Spain, which has led the thaw in European Union relations with Cuba, and expanded trade and investment on the island, has an ongoing human rights dialogue with the Cuban government.

The human rights discussions which Brazil, Spain, and some other governments carry on with the Cuban government and their engagement with Cuban society, will not transform Cuba overnight;

however, they may produce some movement on political prisoners, and they open opportunities for dialogue and for more robust relations with Cuban society. They also lay the groundwork for relationships in the future, as Cuba evolves. Spain, Brazil, and other countries involved in dialogue with Cuba may not see change immediately. At least, though, they are in the debate, while we stand on the sidelines. In the interest of improving the climate for human rights and democracy in Cuba, the U.S. ought to expand trade, travel, and contact with Cuba.

U.S.-Cuba policy and relations with Latin America

Our Cuba policy also has serious repercussions in Latin America. The U.S. relationship with Latin America is a complex one with a diversity of voices and political stripes; but our partners in the region speak with a single voice when it comes to U.S. policy toward Cuba.

Diplomatically, the embargo is a Cold War anachronism, viewed by our Latin American neighbors and allies as a symbol of the past. In February of this year, the leaders of all 32 nations of Latin America, meeting at a summit in Cancun, unanimously called on the United States to end its embargo on Cuba. Cuba was there; the United State was not. If this sounds like a familiar storyline, it's because Latin American leaders issued the same condemnation at the 2009 Summit of the Americas and a 2008 meeting in Rio De Janeiro as well.

During a time when the United States is beginning to find itself dislocated from its long-held position at the helm of the hemispheric agenda, changing our approach to Cuba is a clear way to regain some of the goodwill that has been lost since the Administration took office. A move toward a Cuba policy that is rooted in engagement would improve our standing in Latin America and serve our interests.

This is particularly significant in our relationship with Brazil. The United States sees Brazil as a potential strategic partner in the hemisphere. Brazil has made a major commitment to Cuba—President Lula da Silva has visited twice, made substantial commitments to investment, and conducted private dialogues on human rights and democracy. Brazil has also urged the United States to change our approach to Cuba. Responding positively on Cuba will benefit our relationship with Brazil.

New Approach to Cuba in U.S. National Interest

Changing U.S. policy toward Cuba would not only allow us to better advance our human rights concerns, but also U.S. interests more broadly. Within both a bilateral and regional framework, there are several areas on which greater U.S.-Cuba cooperation is in the U.S. national security interest. From a military and security perspective, Cuba has long-ceased to be a security threat to the United States. Indeed, John. J. “Jack” Sheehan, former Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic for NATO and a retired U.S. Marine Corps general has said, “Cuba ceased being a security threat to the United States over a decade ago. The rest of the world has changed during that decade. Yet, U.S. policymakers remain wedded to a series of dated policies that cry out for a fresh approach.” This opinion was recently echoed by a group of retired military leaders including General James T. Hill, former commander of the United States Southern Command, in a letter to President Obama which stated, “The current policy of isolating Cuba has failed, patently, to achieve our ends. Cuba ceased to be a military threat decades ago.”

Instead of allowing U.S. policy to be guided by outdated threat calculations, we should concentrate on security issues of common interest, such as environmental management and disaster preparedness, migration, and counter drug efforts.

The U.S. and Cuba also have much to learn from each other about environmental management and disaster preparedness. Given Cuba’s location in the path of many Caribbean hurricanes, it has developed a sophisticated system of community preparedness and response measures that have allowed the island to escape the catastrophic loss of human life that the United States experienced as a result of Hurricane Katrina. As noted in a recent report from the Center for International Policy, “Though struck 16 times by major hurricanes in this decade, only 30 people have lost their lives in Cuba, whereas during Hurricane Katrina alone, 1,500 people died in the United States.” While the United States boasts sophisticated forecasting capabilities, our disaster preparedness is less developed, and both countries could greatly benefit from increased exchange and information sharing on these issues.

US-Cuba cooperation on the issue of migration is another area in which it would behoove the United States to expand its incipient dialogue with Cuba. While WOLA was pleased to see the Administration restart talks between the United States and Cuba that had been suspended under the previous administration, these talks must not be allowed to languish. Illegal trafficking of persons is a major concern in the Caribbean. Continued migration discussions between the United States and Cuba could lead to a more effective response to any future outflow of refugees from Cuba, and joint law-enforcement efforts to combat human smuggling across the Florida Straits has the potential to save human lives.

Along with migration, U.S.-Cuba cooperation on counter drug efforts is an important piece of any effective U.S. security strategy vis-à-vis the Caribbean. WOLA recently carried out a fact-finding trip to Cuba on this very issue. In our conversations with both U.S. and Cuban government officials we received confirmation that the very limited cooperation that currently exists is successful, and that an expansion of this cooperation is desired by both our countries.

And in looking beyond our bilateral relationship with Cuba and towards the Caribbean region more broadly, we find an even greater incentive to engage Cuba. As many analysts predicted, one of the effects of the recent escalation of anti-drug operations in Mexico is that traffickers are being forced to seek alternative routes. The Caribbean is a natural alternative, and we are beginning to see signs that it is already seeing an uptick in related illicit activity. Earlier this month it was reported that in a meeting with Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, leaders of several Caribbean nations voiced such concerns and asked for greater U.S. cooperation in addressing the security concerns in the region. To respond effectively to these concerns, a regional approach is needed and indeed, the United States has both acknowledged this need and taken steps to address it through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. But given Cuba's leadership at the regional level, excluding Cuba from this and other future regional initiatives will only stymie efforts to combat the serious problem of drug trafficking and organized crime in the region.

Conclusion

This is not to suggest that ending the embargo would by itself bring change to Cuba. WOLA doesn't believe that trade alone brings democracy and human rights. Trade, travel and engagement

have to be accompanied by political, diplomatic, and economic measures that press for human rights improvement and democratization. In the case of Cuba today, we have almost no contact, and therefore no ability to exercise soft power, or implement political, economic, or diplomatic measures.

Of course, engagement and the exercise of influence is not a magic formula. In Cuba, as in most countries, external actors' ability to effect change in the internal dynamics of a country is limited, and change is a difficult, complicated, and lengthy process. The tools that one country can bring to bear—from diplomatic efforts through citizen diplomacy, civil society dialogue and engagement, expanded contact through trade, the use of the leverage acquired through major investment in a country, or through significant military or economic aid, and on to targeted trade sanctions—can have an impact on another government's decisions about human rights and democratic practices. But even under the best of circumstances, the process of change can be slow and lengthy, responding, as it must, not just to international pressures but to complex internal political dynamics. We hope and expect that engagement will encourage political opening and change in Cuba, but we do not expect that changes in Cuba will happen overnight (and given the evident failure of nearly fifty years of an embargo policy to bring change, we can certainly give engagement some time to work).

Some defenders of our current policy argue that trade and travel with Cuba will strengthen the Cuban economy and therefore prop up the Cuban government, with its abusive record on human rights. This argument ignores the reality that most of the world is already involved in trade with Cuba, and that our policy of isolating it failed decades ago. For the United States to remove restrictions on travel and trade is not to abandon our human rights concerns about Cuba, but to try to make them more realistic and more effective, while also pursuing other U.S. national interests.

The U.S. embargo, rather than isolating Cuba, has isolated the United States. We have cut ourselves off from trade opportunities, shortchanged national interests, and decreased our ability to do anything meaningful about the human rights situation in Cuba. To make a difference, we need to utilize the approach embodied in H.R. 4645, the Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act. By acting to facilitate trade and travel to Cuba, we will not only reverse decades of failure, but we'll go a step further and reap significant political and economic benefits for the United States, and for the cause of human rights and democracy. As Chairman Tanner noted when he called this hearing, **"It is clear to me that the United States' policy toward Cuba is not working. . . . It is time to expand**

our approach to promote U.S. economic interests and support democracy and human rights in Cuba as well.”