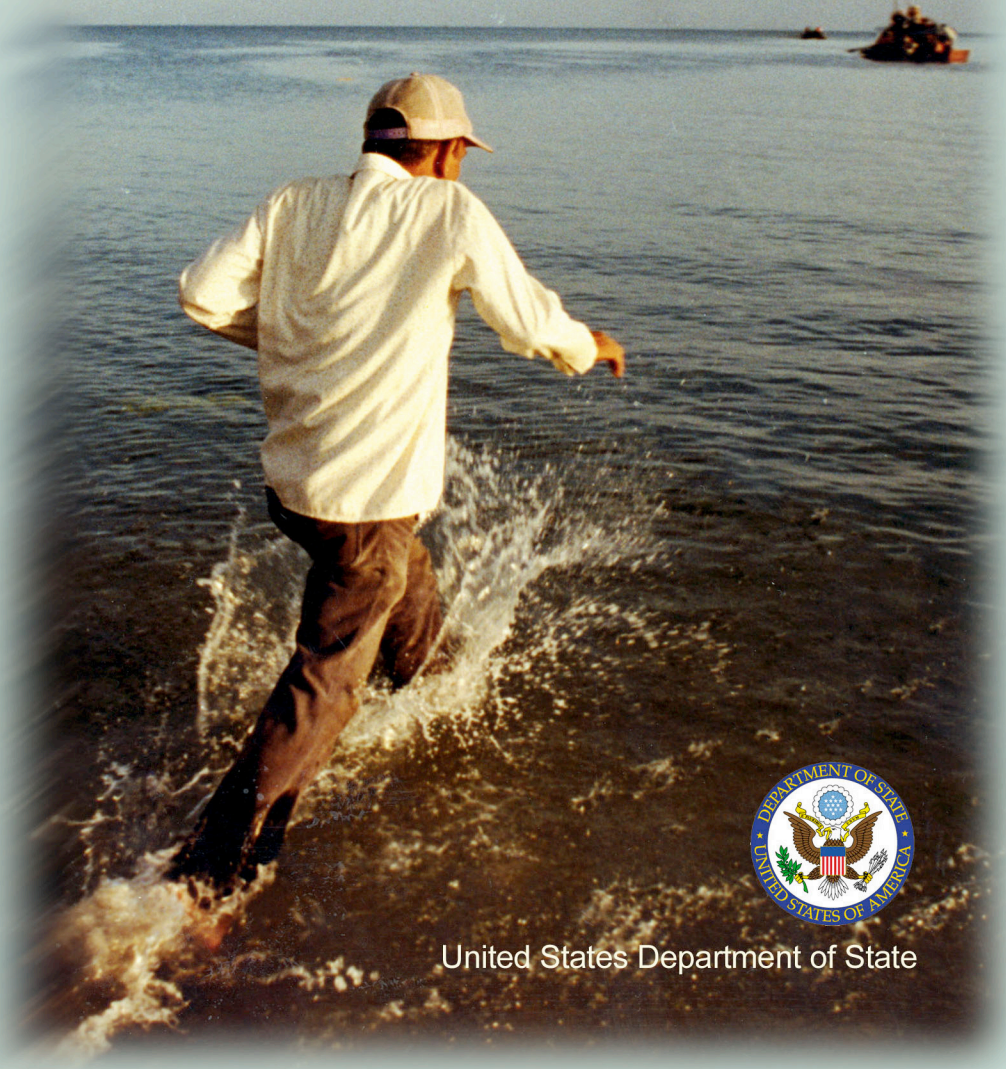
The Dream Deferred: Fear and Freedom in Fidel's Cuba



United States Department of State

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We look forward to a world founded on four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – anywhere in the world.

– President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 6, 1941

Slogans written on an abandoned bus calling for the freedom of political prisoners.
AP photo

During the 1940s, democracy—and the economy—flourished in Cuba. In 1940, Cuba had adopted a constitution considered one of the most democratic and progressive in the region. Presidential elections almost universally regarded as free and fair took place in 1940, 1944 and 1948. By the 1950s, Cuban health care was the envy of the region, with infant mortality rates on a par with the United States and Canada, and superior to such countries as France and Belgium. Cuba's rate of 128 physicians and dentists per 100,000 people in 1957 placed the nation at the same health care level as the Netherlands and ahead of the United Kingdom and Finland. The 1950 UN Statistical Yearbook rated Cuba third among Latin American countries in per capita daily caloric consumption. Literacy rates were among the highest in Latin America, surpassed only by Chile and Argentina. Cubans enjoyed a free public education system from kindergarten to university. Cubans had an 8-hour workday, peasant farmers received land rights under an advanced land reform program, and university access was widely available. Women formed a significant percentage of the Cuban judiciary, the diplomatic service, and municipal officers. The 1940 Constitution had extended social security, provided equal pay for equal work, protected individual and social rights, and outlawed the "latifundia" plantation system of land ownership. According to UN statistics, in 1958 Cuba ranked fifth in the region in per capita GDP, outpaced only by regional powerhouses such as Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

This promising advance toward the Cuban dream of freedom and material well-being was suddenly halted in 1952 when former President Fulgencio Batista found himself running third in the polls for the presidential elections scheduled for that year and decided to take the matter out of the hands of the voters. The Batista coup met with widespread opposition within Cuba, including that of political parties, unions, businessmen and students. Those opposed to Batista's dictatorship—which grew more brutal and repressive as the 1950s progressed—called for a return to the 1940 Constitution, to assurances of civil liberties and free elections. Indeed, this also was the platform of the July 26 Movement, headed by Fidel Castro and a small band of guerrillas who became a symbol of the widespread rejection of Batista's regime.

When Batista suddenly fled Cuba on New Year's Day 1959, a triumphant Cuban population eagerly awaited the restoration of civil liberties and free elections. The Cuban economy had weathered the political repression surprisingly well, remaining the envy of Latin America. Fidel Castro, capturing the sentiment of the moment, promised the eager population an early return to democratic elections and the restoration of civil liberties, forswearing any personal ambition to hold public office.

What the Cuban people got instead in Fidel Castro was a regime that conducted the summary trials and executions of thousands; suppressed political opposition; closed independent media outlets; ended independent economic activity; and made itself an economic dependency and military agent of the Soviet Union.

Today, Cuba, shorn of Soviet subsidies, is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. The country ranks last among the countries examined in the 1950 UN report—its citizens have less access to critical cereals, tubers, and meats than they had in the 1940s. And almost 44 years after Fidel Castro assumed power, the Cuban people still dream of free elections, freedom of expression, and the economic and political rights they once fought so hard to attain.

Cuba is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. AP photo

Castro's War on Freedom

Freedom of Expression and of Speech

> *"Ideas have a price, which you will now have to pay."*
>
> **–Cuban Government interrogators, to one of the 78 men and women arrested in a 2003 crackdown on human rights activists and journalists.**

Ideological conformity in Cuba is imposed at the cost of an elaborate and pervasive system of undercover agents, informers, and neighborhood "committees" who detect and suppress dissent. Police and state security officials regularly harass, threaten, and otherwise abuse human rights advocates in public and private as a means of intimidation and control. Freedom of expression and the press are protected only insofar as they conform to the aims of socialist society. Independent voices can and have been arrested on charges as vague as "dangerousness," defined in the Cuban Penal Code as a "special proclivity of a person to commit crimes, demonstrated by his

SPEECH

Press are barred from trials of dissidents. AP photo

conduct in manifest contradiction of socialist norms." The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights characterized this as a subjective criterion used to justify violations of individual freedoms and due process for individuals whose sole crime was to hold a view different from the official view.

The government tightly controls distribution of information within Cuba, including access to the Internet, and reinforcement of revolutionary ideology and discipline is emphasized over any freedom of expression. All print and electronic media are considered state property under the control of the Communist Party, and independent journalists and librarians are subjected to arbitrary and periodic detentions, harassment, and seizure of equipment and books. Cuban citizens have no access to foreign magazines or newspapers, since many such mainstream publications are outlawed as enemy propaganda, as is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Under the 1999 Law to Protect National Independence and the Economy, anyone possessing or disseminating "subversive" literature faces possible prison terms as long as 20 years.

Cuban police officer stops a woman from entering the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. AP photo

"…The Government has detained, summarily judged, and sentenced more than 70 human rights activists and independent journalists. These sentences range from 6 to 28 years in prison. The vast majority of those sentenced are promoters and organizers of the Varela Project, a citizens' initiative supported by the constitution, which collected more than 11,000 signatures from Cuban citizens. A year ago, we presented these signatures to the National Assembly of Popular Power, asking for a referendum. In this way Cubans could decide to make changes to the laws to guarantee fundamental human rights.

"The majority of the peaceful opposition representing multiple organizations and ideologies–Liberal, Socialist, and Christian Democrat–support this initiative.… The day before the war in Iraq started, the Cuban regime initiated a terrible campaign of repression creating total uncertainty on the island. Peaceful activists were accused of conspiring against the independence and territorial integrity of the nation. However, none were found to possess arms, subversive plans, or secret information. All their actions were public and consisted of writing their ideas, defending human rights, and promoting the Varela Project. These are the prisoners of the Cuban Spring. Their lives and ours are in danger….

"They are trying to impose a false dilemma: continue the current political system without rights or face intervention from the United States.… We do not want or accept either of these alternatives. We do not want intervention and we reject all violence. We want peaceful change toward democracy now.

We Cubans also have rights to our rights. I appeal to you in the name of spiritual unity of free men, that has as its north star the right to life, liberty, justice and self-determination of the people. I appeal in the name of those who support the peaceful struggle.…"

—Oswaldo José Payá Sardinas, Winner of the 2002 Andrei Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Excerpt from "A Calling from Cuba," Havana, May 1, 2003

"We know the risks we are taking. The risk is even in our homes. The government knows what we do and it watches. They know our lives better than we do."

—Omar Rodríguez Saludes, Photographer. Sentenced to 27 years in prison for photographing "places that, because of the state they were in, gave a distorted image of Cuban reality, and he sent them to be published in the foreign, mainly counterrevolutionary, press." Sentence 8/2003, Tribunal Provincial Popular, Havana, April 5, 2003.

A Partial List of Charges Brought Against Cuban Dissidents

- Buying toys for disadvantaged children with money from a Miami group; accepting the Hellman/Hammett award from the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch. **Victor Arroyo, 52, journalist, 26 years in prison.**

- Maintaining ties to the international non-governmental organization Doctors Without Borders; visiting prisoners and their families. **Marcelo Cano Rodríguez, 38, medical doctor, 18 years in prison.**

- Forming the "illegal" and independent Teachers College of Cuba and criticizing the Cuban education system. **Juan Roberto de Miranda Hernández, 57, 20 years in prison.**

- Speaking on a radio program about the Cuban economy. **Oscar Espinosa Chepe, 62, journalist, 20 years in prison.**

- Being paid for articles on Cuba and the Cuban system. **Ricardo Severino González Alfonso, 53, journalist and correspondent for Reporters Without Borders, 20 years in prison.**

- Associating with Amnesty International and other international human rights organizations. **Marcelo Manuel Lopez Banobre, 39, tugboat captain, 15 years in prison.**

- Associating with the International University of Florida; having a typewriter, fax, and books in his home. **Héctor Fernando Maseda Gutiérrez, 60, engineer and physicist, 20 years in prison.**

- Having "subversive" labor-related books and magazines in his home. **Nelson Moline Espino, 38, independent trade unionist, 25 years in prison.**

- Having "aggressive and corrosive" leaflets and literature in his home, putting pro-democracy posters on the street, not paying dues to the official union, having an issue of the Miami newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* at his workplace. **Félix Navarro Rodríguez, 49, journalist and educator, 25 years in prison.**

"…he directs an opposition group of so-called "human rights," carrying out activities and meetings, using our national flag and showing posters asking for freedom for political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, in a frank challenge to the judicial, political, and social system."

–Eduardo Díaz Fleitas, 51, farmer and activist, sentenced to 21 years in prison. Sentence 1/2003, Tribunal Provincial Popular, Pinar del Rio, April 5, 2003

Mandatory exit permits restrict the travel of citizens; denial of such permits is used to punish human rights and political activists, and even ordinary citizens seeking lawful emigration. The government stifles possible emigration or asylum claims from medical mission "volunteers" sent abroad by holding their families hostage in Cuba.

"Informing others objectively and professionally and writing my opinions about the society in which I live cannot be a very serious crime…. No one, no law will make me believe that I have become a gangster or a delinquent just because I report the arrest of a dissident, or list the prices of staple foods in Cuba…."

–Raúl Rivero Castañeda, *Miami Herald*, February 25, 1999. Sentenced to 20 years in prison.

"Amnesty International is particularly concerned at what appears to be a deliberate policy…on the part of the authorities to force dissidents into exile abroad, without the right of return, by threatening them with imprisonment if they do not do so…. Amnesty International is calling on the Cuban authorities to…guarantee to all Cuban citizens their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly; to cease to imprison, confine, or force into exile those who attempt to peacefully exercise such rights…."

–Excerpts, "Dissidents Imprisoned or Forced into Exile," *Amnesty International*, July 1, 1996

Journalist José Eduardo Barella: "Why are you still free?"

Payá: "I could be arrested at any time. The correct question should be, why were dozens of people arrested and convicted, without bombs or subversive plans having been found on them? Their crime was to have demanded their rights and expressed their opinions."

Barella: "Why have you not gone into exile?"

Payá: "Here in Cuba we do not ask why you left, but why you wanted to stay. The choice to stay is in fact a danger and a suffering for my family. But this is where God placed me, and my commitment is to stay in my country and with my people."

–Excerpts, telephone interview with Oswaldo Payá, published May 21, 2003, Sao Paulo Veja, Brazil

Oswaldo Payá, organizer of the Varela Project, is welcomed home by his father after receiving the Freedom of Thought Award in Europe. AP photo

Freedom of Every Person To Worship God in His Own Way

Despite a constitutional separation of church and state and the right of citizens in Cuba to profess and practice any religious belief, the Cuban regime actively controls and monitors the country's religious institutions. Churches and other religious groups must formally register and obtain official recognition. In practice, "new" denominations or faiths are refused registration and subjected to harassment, official interference, and repression. Construction of houses of worship is generally prohibited, and "illegal" worship in private homes is punished by evictions.

The Ministry of Interior engages in active efforts to control and monitor the country's religious institutions through surveillance, infiltration and harassment of religious professionals and practitioners. Government officials continued to prohibit church-affiliated education and the sale of computers, fax machines, and photocopiers to unregistered churches. Officials limit media access for religious leaders and deny prisoners access to reading materials including Bibles.

RELIGION

"Many of our brothers turn to the church in Cuba asking for a word of encouragement, because there is a vague but generalized fear regarding the future among the Cuban people.... The time has come to pass from an avenging state that demands sacrifices and settles scores to a merciful one that is willing to first extend a compassionate hand instead of imposing controls and punishing infractions."

–Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, Archbishop of Havana, Pastoral Letter of February 25, 2003

Cuban jailed dissidents' families walk out of the Santa Rita Church, Sunday May 11, 2003 in Havana. For the third Sunday, prisoners' wives wearing white clothes protest the conditions their husbands are living under in the different jails of the country where most of them have over 20-year sentences. AP photo

"October 24, 2002 – Provincial authorities in Sancti Spiritus confiscated the home of a Cuban house church pastor, claiming it had been purchased illegally. Despite a large, clamorous crowd of church members and neighbors

protesting the confiscation, police forced the pastor, his wife and two children out of the home and all of their possessions were hauled away.

"March 5, 2002 – Baptist Christian Juan Carlos González Leiva was arrested in Ciego de Avila for protesting the treatment of a journalist who was hospitalized after being attacked by police. A blind human rights leader, González also directed an independent Christian library, which was raided by police March 10."
–International Christian Concern (ICC)

Freedom From Want

"There is an ethical problem regarding the distribution of wealth [in Cuba].... Although school and health care are free, wages in general do not cover the cost of living.... Professionals and workers who do not receive economic assistance from relatives abroad are forced to engage in some other type of legal or illegal activity besides their jobs. What effort, but also what a great worry, how many fears and inquietude of conscience.... The faithful ask: Is it a sin to act thus when our expenses surpass the possibilities of our family economy?"
–Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, February 25, 2003 Pastoral Letter on the 150th Anniversary of the Death of Father Félix Varela

Cuban rafter waits out a storm at Cojomar Bay, Cuba.
AP photo

The absence of economic freedom has been as destructive to prosperity as the absence of political freedom to human dignity. Amid the luxury of segregated tourist resorts and markets where only those with dollars can shop, Cuban families can

find it difficult to even feed themselves. On an average salary equivalent to less than $10 a month and with little on sale for pesos, the average Cuban must scramble to survive, stealing from his or her workplace or even resorting to prostitution. The underemployment of a creative and educated population, coupled with almost total control of the "legal" economy by the centralized state bureaucracy, fuels a massive "illegal" economy. Buying and selling meat and produce, fish, milk, herbs, and baked goods outside official markets is generally illegal, as are unofficial repairs and professional services.

WANT

Even those Cubans fortunate enough to work in the tourist industry or for a foreign company are allowed to keep only 5 to 10 percent of their earnings. The rest is appropriated by the government, in clear contravention of international standards.

Those who displease the authorities—perhaps through voicing dissent, or through attempts at immigration, or by publishing accurate economic statistics—face the loss of their jobs and even access to food and basic services. Those who dare to organize independent unions outside the government's control suffer retaliation. The workers' paradise is a paradise lost.

"Cubans expected more than just the overthrow of a bloodthirsty and corrupt tyrant. They expected political democracy, freedom of expression, freedom to gather, a mixed economy, a parallel strengthening of private enterprise and the state, better education and health care. They got some of these things. But they also got a repressive government that ignored basic human rights.... It shouldn't have been this way. Castro seemed... poised to deliver the free land his people desired. He had the support of the world's artistic and intellectual communities.

" ...the persecution of dissidents might have been tolerated as an outgrowth of the revolutionary rhetoric if only Castro had delivered on the economy. But his economic revolution was disastrous. Cuba's enormous strengths—

its vast and intelligent human capital, its unexploited natural resources and fertile lands—were sacrificed to stupid and exotic dogmas.… In the name of a crazed egalitarianism, the nation's cities were denied products from the countryside. Without incentives, farmers stopped producing.… On the wings of dogma, small businesses died.

"…Cuba's economic woes extend beyond U.S. sanctions: the country had come to rely heavily on multimillion dollar subsidies from the Soviet Union… it has had to turn back toward the economic engines of the Batista years: tourism and prostitution."

–Carlos Fuentes, Author, "Cuba's Paradise Lost," ***Los Angeles Times*****, April 20, 2003**

Freedom From Fear

The men and women of Cuba who dare to seek a better future and peaceful democratic change—in a nation they still love and will not abandon—pay a high cost for their courage. Human rights and political activists are harassed by police or face staged "acts of repudiation" by neighborhood brigades.

FEAR

Those who are imprisoned face further indignities. As reported by Human Rights Watch in "Cuba's Repressive Machinery," many Cuban political prisoners spend months in isolation cells. Cuban police or prison guards often heighten the punitive nature of solitary confinement by blocking light or ventilation from a cell, removing beds or mattresses, seizing the clothing and belongings of prisoners, or further restricting already meager rations of food and water.

Due to the lack of sanitation and medical services in prison, many inmates have either developed serious health problems or experienced worsening of preexisting ailments. While serving his sentence, economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe lay on the verge of death after denial of medical treatment for liver cirrhosis and

Yolanda Huergo, wife of a Cuban political prisoner, speaks to the media on June 4, 2003. Her husband talked about prison conditions in a diary which she presented to the press. AP photo

hypertension. Only after intense international pressure did Cuban authorities transfer him to a prison hospital.

Several inmates, including Víctor Rolando Arroyo and Oscar Elías Biscet González, continue to protest human rights injustices from within prison walls, despite retaliatory transfers to tiny punishment cells.

> "State Security is isolating me. I am prohibited from sending letters or communicating with some members of my family.… I am aware that giving publicity to this document will create serious problems for my wife, my family and myself. But no one, no man can change my opinion about liberty, human rights and other beautiful things God gave us when He created us.… I was a healthy man. Today I am a sick person, growing worse with time.… The world must know of the numerous cells with cement beds resembling tombs where men are placed for two or three months until they become mentally insane. I have heard two or three of them, crying at night, asking for help and psychotropic medication. The only answer given by prison authorities—'Why did you look for trouble?' "
>
> **–Juan Carlos González Leiva, Letter from Prison, Holguín, Cuba, May 27, 2003.**

On April 11, 2003, after a 3-year hiatus in executions, the government—citing "serious provocations" and an alleged migration crisis—summarily tried, convicted, and shot three young Cubans involved in an unsuccessful and bloodless hijacking. The three, all Afro-Cuban, were arrested, tried, and shot in the course of a week.

> "The men were given a summary trial, and their appeals….were dealt with in a cursory and wholly inadequate manner. They were shot and killed less than a week after their trial began."
> **–Amnesty International, "Cuba—Executions Mark An Unjustifiable Erosion in Human Rights," April 14, 2003**

> "The recent executions and summary condemnations of Cuban dissidents have shocked even some of the most enthusiastic supporters of Fidel Castro's regime."
> **–Professor Demetrio Magnoli, University of São Paulo, April 30, 2003**

> "The blindness, confusion, arrogance and—senility?—surfaced in the Cuban leader, and Fidel Castro committed the most serious mistake of his life: he ordered the execution of three citizens over the mere fact of trying to flee the island to Miami…. At the end of the road, Fidel Castro is destroying his legacy, trampling his own history, in what seems to be the decline of Cuba's patriarch."
> **–*Hoy* of Quito, Op-Ed "The Decline of Cuba's Patriarch," April 17, 2003**

The World Speaks Out

"The peoples of the United Nations have…reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person…."

–Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

"Democracy is a condition for the full and effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms."

–Article 7, Inter-American Democratic Charter

Since 1945, the United Nations and regional organizations have worked to create a world where fundamental freedoms and human dignity were respected. The Organization of American States (OAS) upheld those principles in the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter, setting out the hemisphere's shared values and the mechanisms to strengthen and defend values such as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, and the democratic order. For over 40 years, however, Cuba has moved against that current, manipulating international fora to justify its open defiance of international law and rejection of even the mildest and most constructive criticism. But the world is silent no longer.

> "The EU, deeply concerned about the continuing flagrant violation of human rights and of fundamental freedoms of members of the Cuban opposition and of independent journalists, being deprived of their freedom for having expressed freely their opinion, calls once again on the Cuban authorities to release immediately all political prisoners."
> **–Statement from the Greek Presidency of the EU, June 6, 2003**

> "France deplores the Cuban Supreme Court's confirmation of the sentences of dozens of dissidents, which is the culmination of a procedure in which the rights of the defense failed to be respected from the very onset."
> **–French Foreign Ministry Spokesman Herve Ladsous, June 24, 2003**

> "[Cuba's actions] concern us deeply from the point of view of our human rights position, and they will clearly have an effect on any decisions that our country makes."
> **–Mexican Foreign Minister Derbez, *Reforma*, April 3, 2003**

> "…We cannot allow our deep connection with everything that comes from Cuba to cloud our vision and prevent us from seeing the true situation."
> **–Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacios, *EFE*, Madrid, July 1, 2003, "Spanish Minister Condemns 'Very Serious' Rights Violations in Cuba"**

"We must say that we hoped for change, we hoped that El Máximo would have had the courage to open Cuba to democracy… and we were wrong. The closed fist of Fidel, full of the flies of rhetorical populism whose buzzing filled the gulags with cadavers, continues to strike defenseless people."

–Fides News Service, the Vatican, April 26, 2003

"Cuba won no heroic battle by shooting these men, but lost my trust, destroyed my hopes, cheated me of illusions… from now on, Cuba can follow its own course, and leave me out."

–José Saramago, 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature, Excerpt from "Até Aqui Chegue," May 1, 2003

"During the past month, Castro's regime has orchestrated the biggest wave of repression Cuba has seen in the past 10 years…. All of this repression is taking place while the country is in the grasp of one of the most severe economic crises…thousands of people are living in misery. It is only natural that they ask for changes and improvements. But once more, Castro uses force to repress them."

–Fernando Madrinha, Associate Editor, *Le Devoir*, Ottawa, April 18, 2003

"For over 40 years, the situation in Cuba has been one of a systematic violation of basic human rights…. Castro's regime deserves to be clearly condemned, as has been done repeatedly in the past with less extreme cases. The [UN High Commission on Human Rights] resolution passed…would make sense if the accused government had any intention of cooperation with the UN…. But Cuba did not allow an observer last year and will not allow one this year either, which renders the resolution ineffective."

–Miguel Guerrero, Journalist and Former Press Minister, *El Mercurio*, Santiago de Chile Editorial, "Not Enough in Geneva," April 24, 2003

"The Czech Republic should exploit all possibilities to express its disapproval of human rights violations in Cuba, and together with the U.S. Congress and European Union countries, support the use of appropriate measures to influence the Cuban Government."

–Czech President Vaclav Klaus, April 22, 2003

Denied or Deferred?

"What happens to a dream deferred?"

—Poet Langston Hughes

The dream of a free and prosperous Cuba—the island paradise of Cuban national hero José Marti's hopes—is far from dead. The voices of freedom cannot be drowned out by the threats of a frightened regime. The machinery of repression has tried to quiet those voices, but in vain. Years of deception cannot hide the truth, either from the people or the international community.

The United States salutes the people of Cuba in their continuing struggle for simple freedoms and human rights. This nation pledges support for a peaceful transition to the democratic dream and a new age in which every Cuban has true freedom and can at last enjoy the dream—deferred but not denied.

Cuban jailed dissidents' families demonstrate outside of St. Rita's Church in Havana.

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