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Cuba Solidarity Day 2009: Supporting Cuba's Democratic Movement

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Cuban political prisoner Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet, Generation Y blogger Yoani Sanchez, and dissident and former political prisoner Jorge Luis García Pérez “Antúnez” are scarcely names familiar to ordinary Americans—but they should be.

After all, they are just three of the growing number of Cuban men and women with the courage and spirit to speak out against the ongoing denial of political and human rights in Cuba. Part of the living force that will shape Cuba's political and economic future, these brave individuals firmly, and correctly, believe that these are the final days of the Castro dictatorship.

May 20 marks the day Cuba officially achieved its independence from Spain and is increasingly a day embraced by Cubans seeking an alternative to the endless glorification of the 1959 Castroite Revolution.

In May 2008 people around the world observed the first Solidarity Day with Cuba—the purpose of which was to “shine a bright light on the Castro regime's abuses” and “call on the government of Cuba to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience.” In Miami, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama called upon Cuba to begin ushering in a new era in relations by taking “significant steps toward democracy, beginning with freeing all political prisoners.”

The purpose of Cuba Solidarity Day is to recognize the legitimate aspirations of all the Cuban people, especially those who form part of a robust and growing civil society movement resisting cruel and arbitrary demands for obedience and silence.

Human Rights, Liberty, and Economic Opportunity. It is no secret that the Castro regime's human rights record is bad. With over 200 prisoners of conscience, as well as regular police surveillance and repression, the Castro system routinely denies the following rights, among others:

- Political participation and the ability to vote in competitive elections;
- Protection against arbitrary arrest, due process of law, and a fair trial;
- Humane treatment while in custody;
- Expression and thought;
- Peaceful assembly;
- Free association; and
- The right to receive and impart information.¹

Cubans younger than 60 cannot even remember a political leader whose name was not Castro.

The grassroots foundations of freedom—civil society, trade unions, and individual enterprise—are routinely squashed by the juggernaut of the Cuban state. The communist regime deadens the lives of millions of Cubans, leaving them apathetic, isolated, and devoid of hope.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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The Cuban government controls 90 percent of all economic activity on the island: It writes every contract, enforces labor discipline, directs the judicial and bureaucratic machinery, and arbitrarily doles out wages and profits. While the ruling few live in comfort, millions of Cubans, especially Afro-Cubans, must subsist on ration cards and gleanings from the black market. Cuba's dual currency system creates an apartheid-like division between Cuba's haves and have-nots. The cupola of the communist regime, not the people or the market, calls every shot and reaps the lion's share of benefits.

The Dialogue That Counts: Cubans Talking to Cubans. Last month, President Obama set in motions steps to allow Cuban-Americans to travel freely to the island and send more remittances. Secretary of State Clinton authorized talks with Cuban officials and opened the door for Cuba's possible return to the Organization of American States (OAS).

Thus far there has been little in the way of reciprocity on the part of the Cuban regime. "We have to do absolutely nothing except take note of and recognize the corrective steps when they [the U.S.] take them," declared Ricardo Alarcon, president of Cuba's parliament. For Fidel Castro, venomous as ever, serious dialogue on human rights and democracy is tantamount to accepting "the whip and yoke" of slavery. This stale mindset, with its familiar intransigence, threatens to stymie hopes for improved relations.

The critical challenge facing the Obama Administration and Congress is shaping a policy that opens up political space and results in positive improvements in Cuba's human rights situation, notably the freeing of political prisoners. American

leadership must also recognize that the most desirable outcome is not a dialogue between the U.S. and Cuba but a potentially transformative dialogue between the Cuban authorities and all sectors of Cuban civil society, including the pro-democracy movement. Changes in U.S.–Cuba policy must be carefully predicated on solidarity and a nurturing relationship with the pro-democratic forces within Cuba. Such steps must go hand-in-hand with other efforts to reshape the general diplomatic and economic relationship with America's communist neighbor.

What the U.S. Should Do:

- The Obama Administration should continue to assist Cuba's pro-democracy movement and civil society. While maintaining support for long-standing dissidents and families of political prisoners, the Administration should more effectively reach out to non-traditional groups like university students, underground artists, unemployed and disaffected youth, Afro-Cubans, independent labor organizations, and other socially marginalized groups.
- The Administration should channel assistance to Cuban civil society for activities on the island that support the rule of law, democratic governance, development, and vocational and professional skills, all of which are vital for a democratic transition.
- The U.S. should encourage the OAS to formulate a plan to assist Cuba in transitioning to democracy and coming into full compliance with the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Our Day: It Is Coming Soon. Cubans on and off the island take comfort and inspiration in a song by

1. The Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001 states that "the essential elements of representative democracy, include, inter alia, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; access to and exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law; the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people; the pluralistic system of political parties and organizations; and the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. See "The Inter-American Democratic Charter," Lima, September 11, 2001, at http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm (May 19, 2009). Equally fundamental is the OAS Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. See "American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man," adopted by the Ninth International Conference of American States, Bogotá, Colombia, 1948, at <http://www.cidh.org/basicos/english/Basic2.American%20Declaration.htm> (May 19, 2009). Individuals interested in Cuba's human rights record should examine the collection of reports linked at "Reports from Human Rights Groups on Cuba," Cubaverdad, at http://www.cubaverdad.net/links_to_human_rights_reports.htm (May 19, 2009).

Cuban-born Willy Chirino entitled “*Nuestro Dia, Ya Viene Llegando*” (Our Day: It Is Coming Soon”).² That future, thanks to solidarity efforts in the U.S. and around the world, will draw closer when Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet walks out of prison, when blogger Yoani Sanchez is free to write and travel without hindrance, and when a humble Afro-Cuban cane-cutter like Jorge Luis García Pérez “Antúnez” is able

to speak his mind without fear of retribution and imprisonment.

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2. Willy Chirino, “Ya Viene Llegando,” recording collected by cubanosinfronteras, February 13, 2007, at <http://vodpod.com/watch/8844-willy-chirino-ya-viene-llegando> (May 19, 2009).