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The Castro Regime's Ongoing Violations of Civil and Political Rights

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
July 13, 2016*

Good afternoon.

It has been one year and eight months since President Obama announced a major change in our country's policy towards Cuba.

It has been eleven months since Secretary Kerry visited Havana and reopened our embassy.

And it has been nearly four months since our President visited Cuba.

Clearly, a lot has changed in just over a year and a half.

But for the people of Cuba, what has changed?

Today we will examine the sorry state of civil and political rights in the Castro brothers' Cuba, and how, despite all the promises by this Administration that an opening to Cuba will lead to a greater opening domestically for the Cuban people we still see political repression – including, it must be noted, repression directed at the Afro-Cuban population.

This is not the first time this subcommittee has expressed concern about the lack of openness to democracy and dissent in Cuba. In fact, one of our witnesses, the courageous Dr. Oscar Biscet, offered dramatic testimony before this subcommittee in February of 2012, when he testified via telephone from the US Interests Section in Havana after evading the Cuban police to get there.

Likewise, on February 5, 2015 we held a hearing entitled “Human Rights in Cuba: An opportunity squandered,” wherein we asked whether the Obama Administration had used the considerable leverage that it wields to seek to better the condition of the Cuban people, or whether it was squandering the opportunity.

Since then, our fear that the Administration has not been pushing sufficiently for the release of political prisoners and other human rights concerns has only grown, with the focus on Obama’s “legacy” instead of the Cuban people.

For example, when President Obama made his visit to Cuba, he and Raul Castro appeared in a photo op press conference. CNN’s Jim Acosta, much to his credit, asked the hard question about Cuba’s political prisoners.

Raul Castro, much to his discredit, denied that there were ANY political prisoners in Cuba. “Give me a list of the political prisoners and I will release them immediately,” Castro taunted. “Just mention the list.”

And President Obama just stood there.

Well, Mr. President, I have a list, right here, of more than fifty political prisoners compiled by my good friend and colleague Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and I am going to enter it into the record.

This is a list that President Obama should have had in breast pocket, ready to pull out when Raul Castro dared him to call his bluff.

You know, when I came to Congress in 1981, with Ronald Reagan, in the days of the old Soviet Union, one of the first issues I worked on was the plight of Soviet Jews and refusniks who were either imprisoned or not allowed to leave the Soviet Union. I recall George Schultz, when he was Secretary of State, saying that whenever he met with his Soviet counterpart, and from him down to the lowest State Department officer, he would bring with him a list of imprisoned dissidents and human rights advocates. Front and center of any discussion, whether about nuclear arms or tensions in the Middle East, Secretary Schulz would bring up dissidents, naming them by name. It was this constant focus on human rights that helped move the Soviet government to allow Jews and others to leave the Soviet Union, people such as the great Natan Sharansky.

And I have another list of names I would like to read, that of six members of the Cuban National Front of Civic Resistance who have applied for visas to come to the United States but for some reason, inexplicably, our State Department has refused to allow to visit the United States. These are:

- Orlando Gómez Echavarría
- Jose Alberto Alvarez Bravo
- Yaíte Diasnell Cruz Sosa

- Yoel Bravo López
- Lázaro Ricardo Fiallo López
- Ciro Aleixis Casanova Pérez

I call upon Secretary Kerry to allow these brave people entry to the United States, so that they can meet with me and my colleagues and enlighten us further as to the current state of affairs in Cuba.

Finally, I note that the Administration has failed to secure the release of fugitives from justice such as Joanne Chesimard, who is on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list, convicted of killing New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster. The Administration must insist upon the unconditional return of Chesimard and all other fugitives from justice, as well as demand that the Castro regime respect the civil and political rights of the Cuban people, before making any further concessions.

And to underscore the point, unconditional means unconditional – there should be no “swap” whereby we exchange convicted Cuban spies Ana Montes or Kendall Meyers for these fugitives as a concession to the Castro regime. The effect of that would be to trade Americans who have committed crimes in the United States for other Americans who have committed crimes in the United States, demoralizing our intelligence community further in the process.

With that, I want to turn to our witnesses, noting as I do that today is July 13, the anniversary of the tugboat massacre of 1994, when 37 victims, including 11 children, were killed by the regime. How little has changed for the Cuban people...