

"The Path to Freedom: Countering Repression and Strengthening Civil Society in Cuba"

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Rubio, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I appreciate this subcommittee's engagement in the Western Hemisphere and applaud its commitment to shared democratic values, human rights, and expanding social and economic opportunity in the Americas.

In most countries in the Western Hemisphere, we see governments working to provide greater political and economic opportunities for citizens but there remain exceptions. That is why supporting human rights, democratic governance, and greater prosperity remains a fundamental U.S. objective throughout the hemisphere, especially in Cuba.

In Cuba, the Obama administration's priority is to empower Cubans to freely determine their own future. The most effective tool we have for doing that is building connections between the Cuban and American people, in order to give Cubans the support and tools they need to move forward independent of their government. U.S. citizens, engaging in well-defined, purposeful travel, are the best ambassadors for our democratic ideals. The hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans who have sent remittances and traveled to the island since we eased the way for them early in this Administration are a central part of a strategy to ensure that Cubans have the opportunities which they deserve. The administration's travel, remittance and people-to-people policies are helping Cubans by providing alternative sources of information, taking advantage of emerging opportunities for self-employment and private property, and strengthening independent civil society.

Our policy also recognizes the importance of engaging with the pro-democracy and human rights activists who have been working for years to expand the political and civil rights of all Cubans. As Secretary Clinton has stated, societies move forward when groups of citizens work together peacefully to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good.

Our programs in Cuba provide humanitarian assistance to political prisoners and their families, support the documentation of human rights abuses, and promote the free flow of information to, from, and within the island. We consistently support and highlight the work of people promoting positive change in Cuba. Last year, Secretary Clinton recognized Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez with the 2011 International Woman of Courage, and the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) won the State Department's 2011 Human Rights Defenders Award.

In 2010 and 2011, the Cuban government, with support from the Spanish government and Catholic Church, released dozens of political prisoners, most on the condition of exile in Spain. We welcomed the release of these political prisoners – including the last of the 75 peaceful activists who were unjustly arrested during the “Black Spring” of 2003 for exercising their universal rights and fundamental freedoms. We were especially pleased that twelve of these brave individuals, including Jose Daniel Ferrer and Presidential Medal of Freedom winner Oscar Biscet, successfully campaigned to remain in Cuba. Unfortunately, their release did not effect a fundamental change in the Cuban government’s poor record on human rights. The Cuban government has continued to punish political dissent, increasingly using repeated, short-term, arbitrary detentions to prevent citizens from assembling peacefully and freely expressing their opinions. It continues to limit fundamental freedoms, including freedoms of speech, freedom of the press, access to information, and peaceful assembly and association--issues on which this subcommittee has strongly spoken out, on and for which it has long advocated for in the region. And it has continued to threaten and harass peaceful human rights defenders, including the courageous “Ladies in White” (“Damas de Blanco”). That is why we will continue to support an independent Cuban civil society and the right of the Cuban people to freely determine their own future, through both governmental policy and the facilitation of nongovernmental engagement

Despite the Cuban government's intolerance of political dissent, faith-based organizations have gained more latitude to conduct religious outreach and provide vital social services to marginalized Cubans. We respect the efforts of various denominations to win greater space within Cuba and value their charitable work. The Administration has taken steps to support religious groups in Cuba by authorizing U.S. religious organizations to sponsor religious travel, and allowing unlimited remittances to support religious activities in Cuba.

Against this backdrop, we also highlight the case of Alan Gross, who has been unjustly imprisoned in Cuba since December 2009. We will continue to seek

the immediate release of this dedicated development worker and loving husband, father, and son.

Enhancing access to communication technology will facilitate Cuba's process of political change. Our U.S. Interests Section in Havana provides free internet access to human rights activists and other Cubans, teaches basic information technology skills, and provides training to independent journalists. Although the Cuban government severely restricts the ability of Cubans to access the internet, cell phones were legalized in Cuba in 2008, and since then cell phone usage has more than doubled, enhancing the connectivity of Cuban civil society. Activists can now report human rights abuses by SMS and on Twitter.

To Cuba and other governments across the hemisphere, our message must be clear: nonviolent dissent is not criminal behavior. Opposition to the government is not criminal behavior. Exercise of free speech is not criminal behavior. To the contrary, free speech is a right that must be defended.

Let me expand on this last point briefly. Mr. Chairman, I know that you are committed to ensuring full respect for freedom of expression in the Americas. I would like to applaud the subcommittee's efforts to underline the importance of freedom of expression in our hemisphere. In some countries in the region, we have seen new tactics used by governments and other actors determined to silence those who challenge them. These include threats and violence against journalists, government regulations aimed at silencing critics, abusive requirements to carry obligatory government broadcasts, and disproportionate and unprecedented lawsuits against media owners. Wherever it occurs in our hemisphere, we need to confront these new measures to limit freedom of expression.

In closing, let me emphasize that our policy toward Cuba is focused on supporting Cubans' desire to freely and peacefully determine their future. We will be the first to cheer when a democratically chosen government in Cuba resumes its full participation in the Inter-American system. This hemisphere has been a trailblazer in enshrining democratic principles in its national and regional institutions, to the enormous shared benefit of the peoples of the Americas. Those principles remain critically relevant to the hemisphere, its challenges, and its future as we underscored most recently at the OAS General Assembly in Bolivia.

Again, I appreciate your commitment to human rights, democracy, economic growth, and security in the Western Hemisphere. I look forward to continuing to

work with you to promote greater freedom and prosperity in Cuba. Thank you and I look forward to answering any questions the Committee may have.

