

Human Rights in Cuba

**{A perspective by the Bahamas-Cuba
Friendship and Solidarity Society}**

Introduction:

To say the least, we the members of the Bahamas-Cuba Friendship and Solidarity Society are impressed with Cuba's achievements in the world.

And for sure, we are fully supportive of the heroic role the Cuban people have played and continue to play on today's world scene.

They do us all proud as they demonstrate that the truth in the notion that the Cuban people have been able to make a great revolution in a small country.

Indeed, our reading and research reveals that this fact is not lost on some right-thinking American scholars.

Here one comes to mind. Her name is Julia Sweig.

This highly respected American Scholar who seems to have a pretty good grasp of what is happening in Cuba reminds her American audience and others of some 'facts' that are salient vis-à-vis Cuba and its politics.

Here take note that she is convinced that, “Cuba is far from a multiparty democracy, but it is a functioning country with highly opinionated citizens where locally elected officials (albeit all from one party) worry about issues such as garbage collection, public transportation, employment, education, health care, and safety.

And she notes that, “...although plagued by worsening corruption, Cuban institutions are staffed by an educated civil service, battle-tested military officers, a capable diplomatic corps, and a skilled work force.

And as she reveals: Cuban citizens are highly literate, cosmopolitan, endlessly entrepreneurial, and by global standards quite healthy.

This is the Cuba we support and this just happens to be some of what the Revolution has achieved in this country, this neighbor of ours – this great and good people who are Cubans.

For ease of reference, we cite some more of what she says about Cuba, its revolution and some of its probable prospects over the course of the next few years.

She is optimistic. So are we.

As Sweig indicates: “The smooth transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his successors is exposing the willful ignorance and wishful thinking of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

As she notes: The post-Fidel transition is already well under way, and change in Cuba will come only gradually from here on out. With or without Fidel, renewed U.S. efforts to topple the revolutionary regime in Havana can do no good -- and have the potential to do considerable harm.

She also tells us that, ever since Fidel Castro gained power in 1959, Washington and the Cuban exile community have been eagerly awaiting the moment when he would lose it -- at which point, the thinking went, they would have carte blanche to remake Cuba in their own image.

As she suggests, there was a fantasy making the rounds suggesting that, {Without Fidel's iron fist to keep Cubans in their place} the island would erupt into a collective demand for rapid change. The long-oppressed population would overthrow Fidel's revolutionary cronies and clamor for capital, expertise, and leadership from the north to transform Cuba into a market democracy with strong ties to the United States.

The fact of the matter is that this has proven to be the case: fantasy and wishful thinking enmeshed and in galore!

Here take note of how Julia Sweig puts and frames the issue: "But that moment has come and gone -- and none of what Washington and the exiles anticipated has come to pass...Even as Cuba-watchers speculate about how

much longer the ailing Fidel will survive, the post-Fidel transition is already well under way.

“Power has been successfully transferred to a new set of leaders, whose priority is to preserve the system while permitting only very gradual reform.”

In addition she adds, “Cubans have not revolted, and their national identity remains tied to the defense of the homeland against U.S. attacks on its sovereignty. As the post-Fidel regime responds to pent-up demands for more democratic participation and economic opportunity, Cuba will undoubtedly change -- but the pace and nature of that change will be mostly imperceptible to the naked American eye.

As she put it otherwise: “Fidel's almost five decades in power came to a close last summer not with the expected bang, or even really a whimper, but in slow motion, with Fidel himself orchestrating the transition.

“The transfer of authority from Fidel to his younger brother, Raúl, and half a dozen loyalists -- who have been running the country under Fidel's watch for decades -- has been notably smooth and stable. Not one violent episode in Cuban streets. No massive exodus of refugees.

Quite evidently, this is so because of the fact that the Cuban people –in their vast and overwhelmingly important numbers- are clearly supportive a system that works for and with them.

Here Sweig seeks to explain this phenomenon:

Her view is to the effect that: To give Cubans a stake in this tradeoff between an open society and sovereign nationhood, the revolution built social, educational, and health programs that remain the envy of the developing world.

- a. Public education became accessible to the entire population, allowing older generations of illiterate peasants to watch their children and grandchildren become doctors and scientists; by 1979, Cuba's literacy rates had risen above 90 percent.**
- b. Life expectancy went from under 60 years at the time of the revolution to almost 80 today (virtually identical to life expectancy in the United States). Although infectious disease levels have been historically lower in Cuba than in many parts of Latin America, the revolutionary government's public vaccination programs completely eliminated polio, diphtheria, tetanus, meningitis, and measles.**
- c. The Cuban state truly has served the poor underclass rather than catering to the domestic elite and its American allies.**
- d. The revolution's investment in human capital has made Cuba uniquely well positioned to take advantage of the global economy.**

In fact, the island faces an overcapacity of professional and scientific talent, since it lacks the industrial base

and foreign investment necessary to create a large number of productive skilled jobs.

And even more dramatic is this fact: With 10,000 students in its science and technology university and already successful joint pharmaceutical ventures with China and Malaysia, Cuba is poised to compete with the upper ranks of developing nations.

But even more remarkable is the facts that Cuba has been able to not only survive, but that it has been able to overcome some very large odds.

Here two immediately come to mind. Clearly, one loss would have come with the implosion of the Soviet Union, Cuba's key ally on the world stage. The other would have been the nightmare that comes with the name Embargo.

Cuba: US Embargo Has Cost Over \$89B

By Will Weissert, Associated Press Writer. September 18, 2007.

HAVANA (AP) -- Washington's 45-year-old embargo has cost Cuba more than \$89 billion to date, wreaking havoc on everything from primary education to pest

control and nearly all other facets of island life, the foreign minister said Tuesday.

Havana produced a 56-page booklet laying out its latest argument against the embargo ahead of next month's meeting in New York of the U.N. General Assembly, which has voted 15 years in a row to urge the United States to lift trade sanctions against Cuba.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said the U.S. policy caused \$3 billion in losses over the past year alone to the economy of Cuba -- which had a 2006 GDP estimated at \$40 billion, according to the CIA World Factbook.

The embargo "has reached levels of schizophrenia and made the last year notable for the ferocious and cruel way the blockade has been applied," Perez Roque told a news conference. Washington, he said, is bent on "persecuting Cuban interests and attempting to beat our people into submission with hunger and disease."

The U.S. sanctions bar American tourists from visiting Cuba and prohibit U.S. companies from doing business with the communist-run nation, with some exceptions for exports of food and farm products, medical supplies and telecommunications equipment.

On Monday, U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez called the embargo "a success," and Washington has long maintained the sanctions are

designed to punish Havana for rights violations, not to hurt the island's people.

Some Democratic presidential candidates have vowed changes to the embargo if elected. Sen. Barack Obama, who recently said he would ease restrictions on Americans wanting to visit family members in Cuba. Sen. Christopher Dodd, meanwhile, has pledged to scrap the embargo entirely if he becomes president.

But Perez Roque said most proposals do not go far enough.

"The blockade should be lifted immediately and unconditionally," he said.

Havana's report said U.S. patents and other provisions of the embargo prevent it from purchasing current medical technologies, pesticides and even materials for blind children because Braille products are produced primarily in the United States.

Internet access on the island is also severely limited and expensive, because Cuba must rely on satellites instead of tapping into one of eight major fiber-optic cables that run underwater near the island but are linked to U.S. interests.

Even Cuba's dilapidated public transportation system feels the pinch. Transportation official Gladys Fernandez, who presented testimony along with other officials during the hours-long ceremony Tuesday, said Havana's decades-old bus system would be able to

handle 20 million more passengers a year if it were allowed to import U.S.-made vehicles and parts.

Perez Roque said 85,000 Americans of Cuban origin visited Cuba in 2003 but that number dropped to 37,000 last year -- after the U.S. government tightened travel restrictions in 2004. He said 59,000 other U.S. visitors flaunted the embargo and visited last year, down from 115,000 in 2003.

Cuba claims as many as 5 million Americans would visit the island annually if travel ban were lifted.

Filmmakers and salsa dancers told reporters of being denied visas to travel to the U.S. for cultural events, and a Special Olympics athlete was barred from an event in Argentina because its primary sponsor was American.

Clearly, the embargo has exacted a cost.

But sadly, while the current administration continues with this misguided policy, the Cuban people have figured out – with some help from their friends- how to survive in a time of embargo and blacklist.

Mr. Bush is apparently oblivious to this reality.

The Transition that Matters:

And so there we have it: some other Americans would have the world believe that something else is set to happen.

Such appears to be the mood today as we reflect on some of what he has said concerning certain preparations for a so-called 'transition' in Cuba.

In this regard, it is to be noted that while Cuba enjoys excellent relations with its Caribbean neighbors, truth also that this good neighbor of ours continues to be threatened by the United States of America.

Quite evidently, this Commander in Chief has little understanding of the fact that world opinion has already been pushed in this direction of revulsion; this time around world opinion is revolted by a United States of America that would crush a state that does not and cannot threaten its vital interests.

A belligerent George W. Bush would have the world believe that Cuba is some modern day tropical gulag.

As he put it in a recent speech, "Cuba's regime no doubt has other horrors still unknown to the rest of the world; once revealed they will shock the conscience of humanity."

This is the same President Bush who claimed that Iraq had possession of certain weapons of mass destruction.

It is agreed and accepted world-wide that if anyone wants to know what horror is all about reference need

only be made to the horrible news that daily emanates from Iraq.

We are convinced that threat and war should only be used in situations where there are clearly no other viable solutions.

We make these prefatory remarks to today's commentary on what seems a penchant on the part of that particularly bellicose regime that currently holds sway in the United States of America; one which seems to relish in war and in the threat of war.

To date, hundreds of thousands of people – some of them innocent men, women and children – have been slaughtered, thanks to a congeries of decisions made by the George W. Bush regime.

Instead of this bellicosity, we would much prefer a scenario where the United States of America would see fit to join its neighbors in the establishment of principled relations with the Republic of Cuba.

This finds echo in some of what Felipe Perez Roque, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cuba had to say at the opening session of the II Cuba-CARICOM Ministerial Meeting, noting that "of special interest to the Caribbean region is the fight against drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, areas in which there is close cooperation among our countries."

We are in full agreement when he suggests that, "Only a multilateral cooperation approach, on the basis of

mutual respect and the principle of shared responsibility, will effectively tackle these problems."

There should therefore be no room here for bombast, bullying or bellicosity on the part of any single state, regardless of its perceived military might.

Like others who have followed the course of the Revolution in Cuba and the role played by millions of Cubans in that process, we are convinced that the transition that truly matters is the one that was ushered in almost half a century ago.

The Cuban Revolution was itself deeply rooted in the long-held aspirations to freedom of Cuban people, even if it went badly later on.

As such, therefore, Fidel Castro and the Revolution he led to victory in the mid twentieth is a lineal descendant of Jose Marti and the great movement he earlier led.

Like hundreds of millions of other peace loving people around the world, we would much prefer living in harmony with nature and with all other peace loving people.

Like hundreds of millions of people around the world, we yearn for the dawning of that day when all countries in our region – inclusive of the United States of America – would commit themselves to policies that defend multilateralism, with full respect for the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United

Nations and for the principles of International Law, peace, security and development.

We agree with the Cuban Foreign Minister when he says, "In our capacity as small islands, we attach vital importance to the protection and preservation of the environment and the sustainable use of natural resources, including our Caribbean Sea. That is a matter of survival and has a decisive influence on the development of our nations."

Human Rights Do Matter:

As members in good standing of the United Nations, the Bahamas and Cuba are pledged like all other members of that august body to respect, defend and protect the human rights of not only their citizens, but also the rights of all other human beings.

Here we note that: The principle of universality of human rights is the cornerstone of international human rights law. This principle, as first emphasized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, has been reiterated in numerous international human rights conventions, declarations, and resolutions.

We are also quite aware of the fact that, Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without

discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible...

We note also and are also quite aware of the fact that, Human rights entail both rights and obligations. States assume obligations and duties under international law to respect, to protect and to fulfill human rights.

The obligation to respect means that States must refrain from interfering with or curtailing the enjoyment of human rights.

The obligation to protect requires States to protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses. The obligation to fulfill means that States must take positive action to facilitate the enjoyment of basic human rights.

At the individual level, while we are entitled our human rights, we should also respect the human rights of others.

The principle of non-discrimination is complemented by the principle of equality, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Human rights are inalienable. They should not be taken away, except in specific situations and according to due process. For example, the right to liberty may be restricted if a person is found guilty of a crime by a court of law.



Roma Children in Kolonia GjakoveDjakovica in Kosovo

We are also mindful of the fact that human rights are indivisible, whether they are civil and political rights, such as the right to life, equality before the law and freedom of expression; economic, social and cultural rights, such as the rights to work, social security and education , or collective rights, such as the rights to development and self-determination, are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent.

The improvement of one right facilitates advancement of the others. Likewise, the deprivation of one right adversely affects the others.

And assuredly, we take full note of the fact that, non-discrimination is a cross-cutting principle in international human rights law. The principle is present in all the major human rights treaties and provides the central theme of some of international human rights conventions such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

We do most seriously believe that notwithstanding their ideological differences, Cuba and the Bahamas respect each other's sovereignty and right to self-determination.

Our country – The Bahamas- is not only geographically contiguous to the Republic of Cuba; the fact today is that both countries share a relationship that is built upon principles of goodwill and solidarity.

In addition to this state to state relationship, the record would show that there has always been any number of other types of social intercourse bonding and binding the Cuban and Bahamian peoples.

We make these points – albeit preliminarily- as prologue to a statement concerning our perceptions and understanding of Cuban commitment to upholding the rights of its citizens, at home and abroad.

But even as we make these observations, we do so fully cognizant of the fact that decisions and actions are never taken in a vacuum; and that as such, context and circumstances do matter.

And for us, what matters more than anything else is the fact that the Cuban state and people have been subjected to no end of pressure – some of it terroristic- for almost half a century.

But the facts also show that notwithstanding the pressure, Cuba has made – and continues to make- a major difference in the world. This is done by way of any number of socially significant engagements with nations and peoples around the world.

To say the least, we the members of the Bahamas-Cuba Friendship and Solidarity Society are impressed.

Evidently, the Cuban Revolution – in its myriad of social, economic and political expressions- continues to make a signal contribution to the human family.

And for sure, we are not so naïve or so congratulatory of Cuba's role in the world that we would cast – even for a moment- a blind eye to the fact that there remains rooms for improvement in that country as far as human rights are concerned.

Evidently, like human beings around the world, the Cuban people continue to strive and aspire to making things better in their country. This –in turn- requires that they learn from their mistakes.

Obviously, this process continues.

The world today knows – and yet again – what it has either suspected or known for a long time; that the United States of America did conspire to kill Fidel Castro and abort the great revolution he and the Cuban people were making in their country.

It is also a fact that thanks to the resilience of the Cuban people, their unbounded love for their native land and the considerable skills of its armed forces; Fidel Castro and the Revolution he ushered in continues.

And so it is today that Cuba has managed – despite the myriad of obstacles placed in way by the United States of America- to survive.

Even more remarkable is the fact that Cuba has had the presence of mind and capacity to be of tremendous assistance to any number of countries around the world.

And so there is no dispute among intelligent people when the conclusion is broached that the Cuban people have made a great revolution in a very small place.

But despite all the good that it has done, Cuba's enemies are implacable.

Quite evidently, Cuba's main enemy in the world remains that most powerful nation in the history of the world; the United States of America.

It is this great nation that today stands self-revealed as being at the forefront of any number of dastardly plans aimed at overthrowing Fidel Castro and the regime he led.

Some of those plans aimed at killing the Cuban leader.

What is interesting today is that when stories such as these were mooted in the seventies, they were dismissed as nothing more than fantasies.

Today we rehash information that has been known by people around the world for a very long time now. That information has to do with the fact that there have been numerous terrorist type attempts by certain United States agencies against the life of Fidel Castro and the regime he has led in Cuba for the past forty seven years.

Today we now know that the news about the assassination plot was leaked by US media in 1971, but it is not until now that documents of the Agency itself confirm this.

We also now know that according to one of the memos, the CIA official Richard Bisell contacted Colonel Sheffield Edwards in August 1960, to determine if the Agency's Security Office had someone available that could advise on a delicate "mob type" mission.

"The objective was Fidel Castro", says the document which affirms the plan was extremely delicate and so only a small group was informed about it.

Mercifully, this and other plots against Fidel Castro and the Revolution he has led have failed.

Today as this lion of a man – in the winter-season of his life – searches for the exit; thankful people around the world watch and wait with him.