

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
US House of Representatives
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight

SUBJECT: *Families Torn Apart: Human Rights and U.S. Restrictions on Cuban-American Travel*

WITNESS TESTIMONY

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Cuban-American With Family in Cuba
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My name is Luisa Montero-Diaz. I was born in Cuba in 1955 and left the island with my immediate family on December 18, 1961. I grew up in a small town in North Carolina, went to college there and moved to the DC area to attend graduate school at the University of Maryland. I currently live in Takoma Park, Maryland with my family. I am a director of a nonprofit organization working with at-risk, marginalized young people (the Latin American Youth Center/ Maryland Division).

My family was the first on both my father's and mother's side of the family to leave Cuba. Through the years, many family members followed us; many did not. Despite never knowing my maternal grandmother (she died before I was born), I have this sense that my life has been much influenced by her. This influence has come to me through my mother and her two sisters. The connection with my two aunts, just as with my grandmother, has not been a physical one. Both my aunts remained in Cuba. Since leaving Cuba when I was six years old, I can count on two hands the number of days I have been physically present with my aunts. Two visits to Cuba, one in the early 80's and the second in the mid-90's allowed me, in essence, to "meet" my aunts as an adult. These trips were exciting, sad, too short and far between, AND life altering.

Even though there has been a geographical divide between our families - through my mother, I grew up feeling an amazingly strong bond with these aunts - a bond that my mother passed down to me and my sister and brother. A bond so strong that I consider these three women - my mother and her two sisters - the most important influences in my life, the way I live it, my values, and the choices I have made.

My mother is now 88 years old. Her older sister passed away in Cuba four years ago; the younger sister, Yara, died less than 2 years ago. The year leading up to my Aunt Yara's death was a rough one on my family. Two nephews living in Cuba died within two months of each other. They were the ones who looked after and cared for my aunt since she did not have children. During her last months, while ailing, physically fragile, but mentally alert, Yara was taken care of by in-laws and a great niece.

My mother longed to see her sister, to check on her, to see for herself that she was being taken care of - her needs being met, to touch her once more. However, she was unable

physically to make a trip to Cuba to see her sister. Certainly my aunt, in her condition, could not travel either. As a daughter and as a niece, my desire was to be able to make that trip for them; to go there as my mother would if she could, taking messages of support and love and concern. And yet this option was and still is not available to me or any other members of my family. We had no choice as extended family.

My mother is old enough and wise enough to bring some resolution to this situation through prayer and her faith that my aunt was well taken care of. This faith is what she has relied on through all of life's difficulties. Up until Yara's death, she continued, as she had for 45 years without missing a week, to write my aunt a weekly letter. Yet, I know there were many nights of lost sleep; there were nights when my mother wondered: Did Yara have dinner tonight? What did she eat? Is she sleeping well? Did they give her the medication? Is she cold?

One trip would not have answered all these questions nor made the loss any less difficult, nor would it have alleviated the pain of years of separation. But one trip would have given consolation. It would have allowed my mother to know the true reality rather than living with the imagined one. And most of all, it would have reinforced familial relationships and obligations – those bonds and influences that are passed on and become part of what forms us from generation to generation.

The current travel restrictions are unfair and inhumane. They fly in the face of family love and bonds and family obligations. The sanctions have not even served their original intention. This is not only a failed policy, it is a counterproductive, harmful one.