

Families Torn Apart: Human Rights and U.S. Restrictions on Cuban-American Travel  
Statement for the Record

By

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Chairman Delahunt and distinguished members of the Committee, I am grateful to appear before this distinguished committee to discuss U.S. restrictions on Cuban-American travel.

I am an American who is grateful for the many opportunities this country has provided since I arrived on its shores 48 years ago on a lonely flight from Havana. I am also the son, brother, nephew and cousin of those who spent years in Fidel Castro's prisons. I admire President George W. Bush's principled advocacy for freedom in every corner of the world. I am also a lifelong Republican and admirer of both Presidents Bush. As a Republican, I am deeply concerned that my party's positions on Cuba will lead it to lose the votes of the only reliably Republican Hispanic group in the country; Cuban-Americans.

Ladies and gentlemen, maintaining restrictions on Cuban-American travel and family remittances risks more than just the Republicans losing the key electoral state of Florida. We as Americans are in danger of losing the moral high ground in our relations with Cuba. Increasing numbers of Cuban-Americans are calling for an end to US restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba by Cuban-Americans. Indeed, data from a poll conducted in March 2007 by Florida International University has demonstrated that 60.2% of Cuban-Americans in South Florida support returning to the pre-2004 rules governing Cuban-American travel and remittances.<sup>1</sup> But even more important, almost all leading dissidents in Cuba today – even those who have been most supportive of U.S. policy in the past – have asked the U.S. government to lift travel and remittance restrictions applied to Cuban-Americans. The U.S. government does not restrict travel to any other country in the world, not even those on the State Department's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Only in the case of Cuba does the U.S. government regulate the rights of persons to visit their families. This makes no sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Poll conducted by Florida International University on April 2007.

<sup>2</sup> United States. U.S. Department of the Treasury. An Overview of O.F.A.C. Regulations Involving Sanctions against Iran. Washington: September 2006.

United States. U.S. Department of the Treasury. An overview of the Foreign Assets Control Regulations as the relate to North Korea. Washington: December 2007.

I am one of those Cuban-Americans who believe we should end all American restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba by Cuban-Americans. Such limits are counterproductive because they increase the Cuban people's dependency on the Cuban government as the only source of employment and information. Limits on family travel and remittances work to destroy family values and represent the opposite of all that is great about the United States.

I have traveled to Cuba several times on humanitarian missions. I have met with Cubans throughout the island; students, pensioners, clergymen, factory workers, farmers, engineers, the homeless and several brave dissidents. I was greeted always with warmth and generosity as well as a barrage of questions on how the world outside Cuba works. I did my best to extol the virtues of a free society where the rule of law underpins the ability of each citizen to choose the life they want to lead. I never met one Cuban who was in favor of restrictions on Cuban-American travel and family remittances; not one.

Cuban-Americans traveling to Cuba are especially powerful agents for change. Their success in the United States serves as a compelling advertisement for what Cubans can accomplish if they are free to pursue their dreams and ambitions.

There are those who say that unfettered travel to Cuba by Europeans and Canadians has done little to advance change. This is disingenuous. The United States is home to the largest community of Cuban émigrés in the world. The impact of a Cuban-American visitor is much more powerful than that of say a German family on vacation. As a small government Republican, I also argue that it should not be up to bureaucrats in Washington to determine what kind of travel by Cuban-Americans is acceptable. Cuban-Americans are citizens of a free country and they should decide for themselves where they wish to travel.

The catastrophic damage wrought on Cuba by Hurricanes Ike and Gustav has brought to the forefront the damage caused by American restrictions on travel and family remittances to Cuba. Cuban-Americans are angry that those who espouse family values wish to prevent families in the United States from helping relatives in Cuba. I know from personal experience how incredibly difficult it is to send money to Cuban relatives who have lost their homes and are in desperate need of food, water and shelter. In many cases, it is virtually impossible.

Meanwhile, Russia and Venezuela have stepped-in with massive amounts of aid to counter the United States offer of \$100,000 in Cuban relief funds. When the United States government announced a \$1billion aid package to Georgia it sent a strong signal that America will fight Russian expansionism and stand with the population of a tiny country fighting for its life. Meanwhile, 90 miles from our shores, Russia has sent four cargo planes of humanitarian aid to Cuba and is seeking to dramatically expand its presence on the island. Venezuela has also been

generous in its aid to Cuba. If we want to contain Russian expansionism, I would argue that \$100mm in public and private sector aid to Cuba and the lifting of travel and family remittances restrictions will get us a bigger bang for our buck than \$1billion in aid to Georgia.

The damage caused by Hurricanes Gustav and Ike should cause us to re-examine all of our policies toward Cuba. A policy such as the ban on Cuban-American travel and remittances so fragrantly contradicts American values of openness and compassion that the policy needs to be scrapped.

Thank you and may God bless America and grant Cuba the freedom it deserves.