

**TESTIMONY OF SYLVIA G. IRIONDO**  
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**(M.A.R. POR CUBA)**  
**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**  
**HUMAN RIGHTS AND OVERSIGHT**  
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. I am most grateful for this opportunity to speak on such an important issue as the one that brings us together for this hearing, "Families Torn Apart: Human Rights and U.S. Restrictions on Cuban American Travel."

Today, Cuba is facing two monumental disasters:

- the natural disasters caused by hurricanes Gustav and Ike which battered the island over a three-week period; and,
- the man-made disaster brought about by nearly 50 years of totalitarian rule and neglect under a brutal dictatorship intent on remaining in power at all costs and responsible for the thousands of Cuban families that have been torn apart and subjected to systematic human rights violations.

The devastation caused by hurricanes Gustav and Ike stretches across the island – from east to west and north to south:

- more than 444,000 homes were damaged, another 63,249 were destroyed;
- more than 2,500 schools are totally or partially damaged;
- Pinar del Rio province alone lost 137 electrical towers, 4,500 electrical posts and 530 transformers;
- 4,355 tons of food in warehouses and stores were lost;
- Western Cuba saw damage to 314 medical facilities, including 16 hospitals, 18 clinics and 191 doctors' offices;
- Almost 80,000 acres of plantains were lost and 25,000 acres of other products

The damage inflicted by the force of these powerful hurricanes requires nothing short of massive disaster relief assistance. The U.S. government has generously offered to provide massive humanitarian assistance to meet the most urgent needs of the victims. But the Cuban regime – incapable of addressing the needs and demands of the Cuban people – has repeatedly rejected U.S. offers. Instead, they are demanding the suspension, at least temporarily, of the trade embargo so that they may buy from U.S. companies on credit.

A move such as this one would not be fair to the Cuban people, those truly suffering the brunt of the hurricanes' force. The only one that stands to gain from easing the trade embargo is the Cuban regime. And as Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez has noted: the Cuban regime is "behind on payments to most of its creditors."

Long-time advocates for appeasement with Havana's regime have activated intense campaigns against the embargo, while a few others believe that the temporary lifting of restrictions – on both family remittances and Cuban American travel to the island – will benefit Cuba's families.

The tragedy that the Cuban people face in the aftermath of Gustav and Ike should not be utilized as an argument to promote the partial, total or temporary lifting of restrictions, which were designed to help bring about democratic change in Cuba. Nor should it be used to advance a political agenda in the upcoming U.S. elections.

Those who advocate the lifting of sanctions argue that this would facilitate person-to-person assistance in this dire time of need. However, the situation in Cuba is such that even if the travel restrictions were lifted little would be accomplished in terms of providing the massive assistance the Cuban people need – roofs, houses, food, crops, livestock and medicine, among many more.

We must also keep in mind that travel to Cuba by Cubans residing in the U.S. is regulated by the Cuban regime, which charges exorbitant costs. And that Cuba lacks the infrastructure necessary to accommodate the additional influx of visitors.

Of the thousands of Cubans residing in the U.S., not many would be able to travel immediately given the required documentation and the high fees charged by the agencies accredited to process travel to Cuba. For many others, the Cuban regime will not grant them permission to enter Cuba.

Those families are torn apart – and will remain so – but not by the U.S. sanctions, but by the actions of the Cuban regime.

A lifting of travel restrictions would result in a selective process – feasible only for those U.S. residents who have financial flexibility and beneficial only for those Cubans with relatives living stateside. It would serve only to foster increased segregation and abuses against those 11 million Cubans living on the island.

By helping a select few, we would create a situation that pits Cubans who have relatives abroad against those who don't – something that no Cuban wants to see in this time of need.

Should the restrictions be lifted, the Cuban regime would generate a considerable amount of additional resources which, as time and history have proven, would be used to increase repression against the civic resistance movement and to solidify the regime's stay in power at the expense of the Cuban people. It would only serve to minimize the impact of this tragedy which requires massive humanitarian assistance.

**Lost in the din of the debate are the reasons for which these sanctions were rightly instituted and why they must remain in place.**

The 2004 sanctions – including restrictions on Cuban American travel to the island – were imposed following the March 2003 violent wave of repression that resulted in the arbitrary arrests, summary trials, prison sentences of up to 28 years for more than 75 pro-democracy leaders, independent journalists and human rights activists; and the execution by firing squad of three young men who attempted to flee Cuba aboard a stolen ferry boat.

As of today, 25 of the men and women incarcerated in 2003 have been released. Another 50 remain in prison, held under inhumane conditions – isolated cells infested by rats, inadequate sanitary facilities, rancid food and the absence of critical medical care.

The mother of one of those political prisoners is with us in the audience. She is Blanca Gonzalez and her son is Normando Hernandez, an independent journalist sentenced to 25 years in prison for daring to speak out in favor of human rights and freedom. Normando is very sick and the Cuban regime continues to deny him the medical care he urgently requires.

**Does Blanca feel that the lifting of U.S. restrictions on Cuban American travel and other sanctions will benefit Cuban families? Let me submit her response for the record: *“There are 11 million Cubans on the island, the majority of which do not have relatives abroad. There are also nearly 300 political prisoners in Cuba that we know of. We need to help all of them. I am against lifting restrictions that will have no impact on the well-being of the Cuban nation as a whole and will be used by the regime for political gain. The only restrictions that need to be lifted are those imposed by the regime upon the fundamental freedoms and rights of the Cuban people.”***

Since the restrictions were imposed, the economic resources that the regime needs to carry out massive repression such as the one carried out against Blanca’s son have been affected, keeping hard currency away from Cuba’s repressive state police and military apparatus. As a result of these restrictions, the regime has been unable to undertake a similar operation since the March 18<sup>th</sup> crackdown and the Cuban civic resistance has steadily grown.

The purpose of these restrictions was to erode the regime’s ability to repress, while facilitating a process of internal democratization to aid Cuba’s pro-democracy movement channel the aspirations for change of an overwhelming majority of the Cuban people.

Proponents of the lifting of sanctions insist that the restrictions serve to keep Cuban families torn apart.

Families torn apart are the parents of the U.S. citizens and resident who were shot down by Cuban Air Force MiGs on February 24, 1996 while conducting a Brothers to the Rescue search and rescue flight in international airspace in the Florida Straits to save Cubans fleeing the island.

Families torn apart are the relatives and children of political prisoners who cannot have their loved ones at home.

Families torn apart are the victims of crimes continually perpetrated by this regime, such as the massacre of the 13<sup>th</sup> of March Tugboat on July 13, 1994, among others.

Those are some of the families torn apart by a ruthless regime that aims to control every aspect of its citizens’ lives and tramples upon inalienable God-given rights.

Current U.S. laws and regulations provide the mechanisms to send humanitarian assistance to the victims in Cuba through non governmental organizations with appropriate licenses. In fact, the U.S. is the number one provider of humanitarian assistance to Cuba. Regrettably, Cuba’s regime continues to refuse massive humanitarian assistance from the United States. It is not the time to unilaterally lift these sanctions, but the time to stand together as one and exert international pressure on the regime to allow humanitarian assistance to reach the Cuban people. To do otherwise in the midst of a national emergency would be a grave mistake.

**It is not U.S. law that needs to be changed; it’s the Cuban regime.**

**Thank-you!**