Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2006
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

Cuba

Cuba is a totalitarian state led by an acting president, General Raul Castro. Citizens do not have the right to change their government and therefore could not challenge the July 31 announcement that Fidel Castro "was "delegating" authority to his brother.

The government's human rights record remained poor, and the government continued to commit numerous, serious abuses. There were at least 283 political prisoners and detainees at year's end. Thousands of citizens served sentences for "dangerousness," in the absence of any criminal activity. Beatings and abuse of detainees and prisoners, including human rights activists, were carried out with impunity; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions included denial of medical care. The government retaliated against those who sought peaceful political change through frequent harassment, beatings, and threats against political opponents by government-recruited mobs, police, and state security officials; frequent arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights advocates and members of independent professional organizations; denial of fair trial, particularly to political prisoners; and interference with privacy, such as pervasive monitoring of private communications, including use of the Internet. There were also severe limitations on freedom of speech and press; denial of peaceful assembly and association; restrictions on freedom of movement, including selective denial of exit permits to thousands of citizens; and refusal to recognize domestic human rights groups or permit them to function legally. Sex tourism, discrimination against persons of African descent, and severe restrictions on worker rights, including the right to strike or form independent unions, were also problems.

The priorities of the U.S. Government are to hasten a transition to democracy, to break the government's information blockade, and to call international attention to the chronic human rights problems on the island. Given that the regime tolerates no attempt at political reform, significant human rights improvements or movement toward an open society and democratic political processes are extremely difficult to achieve under current conditions. Nevertheless, on July 10, the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba released its second report, with recommendations for accelerating a peaceful democratic transition in the country and coordinating U.S. support for a free and democratic government. The report's recommended actions are intended to empower Cuba's civil society, give its citizens access to information, and deny revenue to the Castro regime. Also on July 10, President Bush announced his approval of the "Compact with the People of Cuba," which outlines how the United States will support the country's citizens, if they ask for U.S. assistance, in their transition from the Castro regime to freedom and democracy. To support a democratic transition government, the compact pledges, among other things, to help rebuild the shattered economy and to provide emergency food, water, fuel, and medical equipment throughout the country.

During the year U.S. officials in Havana also worked with like-minded diplomatic colleagues to support pro-democracy advocates. This cooperation included collaborating with these other diplomats on

outreach activities, such as providing dissidents with a secure venue where they could hold uncensored discussions without fear of being arrested. Cooperation also included the sharing of press clips and other information about developments throughout the country via the Internet. The United States also issued high-level public statements about the country's very poor record of respect for democracy and human rights and encouraged other governments to do the same.

U.S. officials in the country informed citizens about democracy, fundamental rights, and a multiparty system by holding dozens of workshops, briefings, videoconferences, and teleconferences; interacting extensively with human rights activists and prodemocracy advocates; distributing large numbers of publications; providing support and training for independent journalists and librarians; observing rare public demonstrations; and conducting outreach to civil society.

To address government restrictions on free speech and freedom of the press, U.S. officials in the country provided two free Internet centers in a secure location, which represented the country's largest Internet cafe and featured 23 computers serving approximately 200 visitors per week. These centers were key tools for U.S. efforts to promote media freedom. Human rights activists could use the Internet to expose human rights abuses to an international audience. Through these centers, independent journalists were able to have their articles published overseas. U.S. officials also held more than a dozen press workshops to improve the professionalism of independent journalists and continued to operate the country's only electronic news billboard, featuring news headlines and other materials, including passages from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To break the government's stranglehold on public discourse and promote freedom of speech, U.S. officials in Havana continued to increase citizen access to information about events inside and outside the country. During the year the United States distributed 287,931 books, articles, and pamphlets. U.S. officials also distributed several thousand short-wave radios, which enabled citizens to obtain information from the BBC, Radio Prague, or Miami-based stations, including Radio Marti. Over the past four years more than 133,000 citizens who have entered the U.S. diplomatic facilities were able to view the Spanish-language version of Cable News Network, read and take home press clips and other informative materials, and learn about their government's incarceration of citizens who sought peaceful change. U.S. programs also supported approximately 300 independent libraries throughout the country. The United States also delivered books, articles, pamphlets, and other reading and electronic materials, including DVDs, to these libraries. U.S. officials in the country made follow-up visits to ensure that the materials were in fact being offered to the public, as intended. U.S. officials also held training sessions to enhance the professionalism of independent librarians, thereby allowing them to provide citizens with wider access to information than would otherwise be available.

The United States supported the country's NGOs and other members of independent civil society in numerous ways. U.S. officials met frequently with activists and with relatives of incarcerated political prisoners, providing moral and limited material support, gathering and reporting information, and relaying important messages to U.S. officials in Washington. This interaction helped the United States inform and empower prodemocracy groups, opposition parties, labor unions, independent library networks, youth organizations, independent press agencies, groups working for the release of political

prisoners, and other grass-roots organizations, allowing them to work for democratic change. On November 24, U.S. officials helped three opposition youth groups hold an unprecedented forum that brought together 64 young activists, two of them from Mexico. On December 10, when government officials and their militant supporters attacked 12 activists who were carrying out a silent march to mark International Human Rights Day, U.S. officials witnessed and documented the attack, to remind the activists and the regime of U.S. concern. On the same day, Chief of Mission Michael E. Parmly met with leading dissidents and relatives of political prisoners.

To increase the flow of accurate information concerning democracy and human rights to, from, and within the country, the U.S. Government also provided grants to U.S. universities and NGOs to undertake direct outreach to citizens in the country. These outreach efforts helped build solidarity with democracy and human rights defenders in the country. U.S. officials in the country also provided briefings and arranged other events to help visiting groups of U.S. university students understand the human rights situation on the island, thus countering disinformation and contributing to heightened awareness among Americans regarding human rights violations in the country.

The United States used venues such as workshops, briefings, teleconferences, and videoconferences for citizens to share ideas about the rule of law, judicial independence, and key political and economic freedoms. On October 23, a video-link connected human rights defenders in the country with civil rights campaigners in Mississippi to celebrate the life of Rosa Parks and discuss life at present for citizens on the island. On December 8, a videoconference enabled economists in the country to interact with experts from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and InterAmerican Development Bank to discuss possible roles for these organizations in helping the country transition to a market economy. This helped familiarize the Cuban economists with the critical role that international financial institutions can play in countries transitioning to democracy and how these institutions' work in other countries has helped promote economic freedom. U.S. officials in the country also focused on women's rights, press freedom, youth activism, and cultural ties. U.S. officials held teleconferences to connect human rights groups in the country with their counterparts overseas. On May 24, a conference call enabled some of the country's human rights defenders to exchange views on promoting democracy and human rights with the "Group of Friends for a Democratic Cuba," an alliance of U.S. lawmakers, European diplomats in Washington, and prominent members of the Cuban exile community. U.S. officials in the country also regularly distributed copies of the U.S. Constitution to prodemocracy advocates and lawyers in the country who were interested in rewriting the country's constitution during a transition period.

U.S. officials in the country monitored the cases of hundreds of political prisoners and met frequently with their families and organizations. U.S. officials helped deliver medicines to sick political prisoners and met frequently with individuals who had been harassed, attacked or detained in connection with their prodemocracy activities, including a man and his wife who were assaulted in October by government-supported militants after attending a peaceful discussion on human rights. U.S. officials kept in contact with high-profile dissidents, such as hunger-striking journalist Guillermo Farinas, and with youth activists, members of religious organizations, the "Ladies in White," and others. U.S. officials in the country frequently invited human rights activists and relatives of imprisoned activists to representational events to underscore their legitimate place in the country's civil society.

The U.S. Government continued to deny visas to those implicated in human rights violations, including those involved in the show trials of the 75 activists jailed in March 2003. Membership in a totalitarian party was also taken into consideration in visa denial decisions, in accordance with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act.

The United States continued to operate an in-country refugee processing program in Havana to provide relief to those suffering from persecution or a well-founded fear thereof. More than 6,000 individuals were approved for refugee status during the year. Under the U.S.-Cuba Migration Accords, the country's government pledged not to retaliate against any citizen returned to the island after attempting an illegal voyage to the United States. To verify compliance, U.S. officials conducted interviews in the Havana homes of returned "rafters" and gathered information on job dismissals, harassment by the government's state security institutions, and other reprisals. To help protect repatriated rafters, U.S. officials informed all such individuals of their rights under the Migration Accords.

To promote religious freedom, U.S. officials engaged a broad range of religious leaders in discourse and on many occasions invited them to representational events. During the year the U.S. Government continued to issue travel licenses to U.S.-based religious representatives whose work in the country promoted religious freedom.

U.S. officials promoted respect for labor rights in the country through frequent meetings with labor activists and the families and organizations of labor activists imprisoned on political grounds. To demonstrate that the United States regards labor rights as very important and supports worker rights, in May a U.S. official attended an inaugural labor-rights training session. The United States also provided limited material support and information to labor activists to increase awareness of fundamental labor rights and international labor laws.