

To: The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights

Re: February 2009 Session of the Human Rights Council (Universal Periodic Review Mechanism)

Human Rights in Cuba

The *Australia Cuba Friendship Society, Sydney*, which represents several hundred members in and around Sydney, NSW, Australia, is pleased to be able to report our view on the state of human rights in Cuba.

First, it must be noted that Cuba is a signatory to the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as the Covenant on Civil and Political rights. Moreover, Cuba has been elected as a founding member of the UN Human Rights Council by the vote of more than two thirds of the UN member states. The latter indicates the level of global respect for Cuba in matters relating to human rights.

The issue of human rights abuse is indeed a pressing one. Unfortunately, it is an issue that has often been abused itself. Some powerful nations, concerned with preserving and extending their power, have used “human rights” as a political weapon to denigrate their political adversaries while not even commenting on actual atrocities committed by their allies. This selectivity and acceptance of double standards has only served to take legitimate attention away from human rights issues and hinder the development of a truly global solution to this problem. Indeed, it seems that problems of this nature were responsible for the loss of respect for the former UN Commission on Human Rights and for its ultimate demise.

For decades, Cuba has been selected for this type of abuse by the government of the USA which has been supported over the years by diverse other governments over which Washington holds economic and political influence.

The prime criticisms of Cuba have centred around an alleged lack of plurality in its electoral system and an alleged intolerance and harsh treatment of political opponents. These criticisms are based on a pattern of misinformation, of overt provocation and manipulation by Washington and a deliberate attempt to obscure the real nature of Cuban society.

Over the last 30 years Cuba has developed a unique parliamentary system. Cuba’s experience of the multi-party representative system in the first half of the twentieth century showed that such a system ultimately leads to interference and domination by rich nations which use their economic power to usurp the sovereignty of poorer nations. This period in Cuba was characterised by instability, inequality, periodic coups and a lack of proper health and education for ordinary Cubans. Havana was degraded into a brothel for the USA. The current electoral process in Cuba rejects political parties in the electoral process and consists of local people nominating for office and putting themselves forward for election by their peers. These elections are not dominated by big-money politics and candidates must obtain more than 50% of the constituent vote to take office and their electorate can recall them at any point in the electoral cycle. The democratic nature of the system can be surmised from the over 95% turnout at every election. The election of candidates as individuals rather

than as party-bound members provides a much greater potential for plurality than is found in the two-party states such as the USA. To declare this system to be dictatorial is the height of hypocrisy. Moreover, the UN human rights covenants recognise all peoples' rights to pursue their own political system.

As for political opposition, genuine dissent is welcome in Cuba if it represents an attempt to improve the lot of the Cuban people. It is hard to imagine a country that has undergone more positive change than Cuba over the past 50 years despite periods of extreme hardship. Cuba would not have emerged from its severe economic challenges in the 1990's had it not been for the solidarity of Cubans, one for another, and for their ability to enter into critical democratic dialogue concerning the dire circumstances in which they found themselves.

Washington is keen to point to a particular group of people who have been imprisoned in Cuba. While the USA claims that they are but innocent political dissidents or even hapless "librarians", they are, in fact, people who have been tried and found to be in the pay of Washington and doing Washington's bidding when it comes to expressing their "dissent". For almost 50 years, the United States of America has maintained a harsh economic blockade on Cuba. The USA supported an actual invasion of Cuba in the early 1960's and, at best, has turned a blind eye to terrorist groups organised on US soil that have cost more than 3000 Cuban lives over the past 50 years. One of these self-confessed terrorists, Orlando Bosch, was actually granted a pardon by President G. Bush Snr. and lives in the US, a free man. It would be fair to say that the US policy towards Cuba is one of genocide. Under these circumstances, any nation would do as Cuba has done and keep people in the pay of such a hostile power under surveillance and, when necessary, arrest and try them. The fact that some such prisoners have been released due to ill-health is indicative that the Cuban system is not overly punitive. One has to compare this to the disgraceful treatment that is meted out to US detainees at their illegal prison camp at Guantanamo in Cuba.

However, the consideration of human rights in Cuba goes far deeper than merely defending it from the hypocrisy and double standards of Washington. There are extraordinary achievements in Cuba within the realm of human rights. Over the past 50 years, Cubans have come to enjoy a system of free universal education and health that is the envy of much of the world. And, not content with simply bringing these fundamental human rights to their own people, tens of thousands of Cubans are currently in dozens of countries around the world bringing health and education services to those in need, all at Cuba's expense. Moreover, many thousands of people from around the world are in Cuba enjoying the benefit a university education, most notably in Cuba's medical schools.

When you visit Cuba, you realise that all Cubans, regardless of race, sex, religious faith or political ideology, are housed, employed (1.9% unemployment), well dressed and adequately fed which is a fulfilment of human rights that is, unfortunately, far from universal around the world. Too often, the fulfilment of such fundamental rights goes unnoticed by the well-off of the world. Cubans also have access to a lively cultural life which has become world famous. Cuba's 15,000 social workers offer Cubans an array of individual services relating to nutritional advice, maternal needs, aged care and disability assistance. Cuba has managed to fulfil its pledge concerning the UN Millennium Development Goals despite the great hardship that it experienced

in the 1990's. The right to development is something that is still very elusive to so many nations. Last year, the World Wildlife Fund declared that the only country in the world with "sustainable development" was Cuba!

Finally, Cuba is a human rights advocate for the majority world. Its leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement has given Cuba a platform from which to emphasise issues such as the global food crisis which is being exacerbated by the conversion of food to fuel and the treatment of food as simply another global commodity.

So, we would conclude that human rights in Cuba are deeply respected and that this respect radiates out to include all of the world's people who should all have the opportunity to access all the human rights described in the United Nations covenants.

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