

**Testimony prepared by Bertha Antúnez Pernet for the United States**

**House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee**

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Good morning. My name is Bertha Antúnez Pernet. I come here today as the sister and niece of political prisoners. I left Cuba a short time ago. As an activist in my country, I worked as best I could to organize the family members of political prisoners to advocate for their release. My uncle, Omar Pernet, who has serious health problems after spending several years in prison, was removed from prison to Spain last year. My brother, Jorge Luis García Pérez, usually known as "Antúnez," who served 17 years as a political prisoner, remains in Cuba, struggling for freedom as part of the resistance for the rights of the Cuban people, for the democratic change that the majority of the people want.

The Castro government's war against those Cubans who peacefully advocate for change in Cuba seeks to maintain and increase repression while avoiding criticism on the global stage and international condemnation of its repressive conduct.

The Castro regime feels emboldened by the half dozen Latin American heads of state who have traveled to Havana to embrace the region's longest reigning and bloodiest dictator; by Spain's policy toward the Island, the objective of which is to bolster and uphold the dictatorship, and by the increasing influence of Hugo Chávez in the region.

On the other hand, the regime fears the ever more manifest defiance and non cooperation of the Cuban people. Therefore, perceiving the weakness in the world democratic community, it has made its dirty war ever more public in an effort to still the unrest in the hearts of the Cuban people. The physical attack on blogger Yoani Sánchez and her companions just a few days ago is an example of this.

My own brother Jorge Luis, released from prison in April, 2007, has decided to remain in our country in order to continue the civic struggle for democratic change. He has been the target of constant arrests, beatings, and harassment by Castro's repressive apparatus. Jorge Luis has seen how the Castro regime becomes bolder and bolder in its repression as it receives unilateral concessions from the world's democracies.

In April of this year, in a letter to the Cuban American members of Congress, he wrote: “It is extraordinarily remarkable that while the Castro Regime increases repression, while the mistreatment of our compatriots inside and outside of the prisons increases, certain, particular sectors [of the United States] seek engagement with the oldest and most repressive dictatorship of the continent.”

Therefore, I believe this is not the time for the United States government to transform its policy regarding travel to Cuba. Indeed, those who, in good faith, believe that by doing this they will help the Cuban people, are mistaken. I say this as someone who was born and lived all her life in Cuba until a short time ago, and I am speaking to you about the reality I know well. Throughout all my life, I have faced and confronted the prison wardens, the State Security agents, the military personnel and agents of repression who are the true face of the regime. I know the regime’s contempt for the Cuban people, and how they show no mercy to those of us who are black. The experiences I have lived through do not allow me to fall under the spell of the regime’s sophisticated diplomats, agents of influence in key positions, or of its professional propagandists.

The real people of Cuba, the Cuban people that suffer and deeply desire to live in freedom, will not benefit from any tourist travel. Rather, those resources will serve the totalitarian regime to increase its repressive capabilities. Some people ingenuously think that tourists will have direct contact with the Cuban people, and that this will help Cubans to have a clear vision of freedom. In the first place, Cubans are reprimanded, fined, and even imprisoned for maintaining contact with tourists. There are places in Cuba where Cubans are subject to restricted entry or time schedules so that they will not be present at the same time as tourists.

It must be understood that for years, European, Canadian, and Latin American tourists have traveled to Cuba, without having any impact on the Cuban reality, but rather on the government's coffers.

It is an error to think that American tourism will mean something positive to the Cuban people. What the Cuban people need once again is the support of the American people in their struggle for freedom. The Cuban people and the internal resistance, more so than they need tourists, need people who will stand in solidarity in the US Congress and advocate for their

liberation. We ask recognition for the men and women who run grave risks for the sake of the rights of an entire people. We ask for a voice to be raised against the repression, the prisons, and the censorship imposed against our people for 50 years.

There are those who hold that the Castro regime represses in order to avoid a rapprochement with the United States. This is to mistake the real nature of that regime. The Castro regime represses because its priority is to stay in power. The reason why it has spent 50 years killing, imprisoning, persecuting and forcibly exiling Cubans is because it knows very well that the immense majority of the Cuban people desire freedom. If the Cuban people were not repressed, we would already be free.

The regime wants the discussion on Cuba in a place as important as this to revolve around the questions of "Tourists or no tourists? Commercial relations or no commercial relations?" because the regime fears this Congress making the debate on how the United States can directly support those who struggle for Cuba's freedom its priority.

And I ask you, to echo the opinion of my brother Antúnez and of many thousands of Cubans pro-democracy activists on the Island: On which side does the US Congress wish to be? On the side of those who engage in repression, and attempt to silence the free thought and voice of the Cuban people? On the side of those who today engage in torture in Cuban prisons? Or on the side of those who engage in civic, non violent struggle for Cuba's freedom? On the side of the unarmed and repressed, or on the side of those who flaunt their power, self servingly, and unscrupulously for over 50 years? On the side of a totalitarian regime nearing its end, or of a young and vigorous resistance that sooner, rather than later, shall take the reins of its country?

Thank you.