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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
DETERIORATING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
CONDITIONS IN CUBA

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American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora
1200 Coral Way
Miami, Florida 33145

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair

Stephen Schneck

Frank Wolf

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Adjourn

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. FELIPE: Good morning. Welcome to the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora, one of Miami's newest institutions, but an institution that despite our youth, despite our infancy, quite frankly, has quickly become the command center for the Cuban community.

It is here within the last 12 months we have received seven heads of state, including the legendary Nobel Laureate Lech Walesa, who I'm pleased to announce will house his U.S. office of his foundation right here out of our museum and with whom we will soon have an exhibit chronicling the struggle of the Solidarity movement in Poland and the role that the Church played in that movement.

More importantly, this is the place where our elected officials from both parties come together every time they want to talk to our community, get information from our community.

It's where Senator Rubio has come to

announce his Cuba policy. It's where Senator Scott has come here to our community.

It's where Senator Menendez received our coveted Cuban Legacy Award.

But more importantly, it's where the elected officials representing 95 percent of Cuban Americans came together upon President Biden's, beginning of President Biden's term, to say our Cuba policy does not belong to any administration and is a bipartisan policy, stated more eloquently by Congressman Gimenez, when he said:

My colleagues and I don't agree on a lot of things, but regardless of party, we agree on this: Cuba must be free.

And that is the spirit that we carry in this museum. It is the spirit that we will have in our permanent exhibition soon to be opened in this September to coincide with the school year, and it is a place that is honored to be able to serve as a venue for important hearings such as this.

When Mr. Babun and his group approached us

about being able to host, we couldn't be happier because our vision, very much in line with the work of this Commission. You see the struggle in Cuba for freedom is very much a struggle to bring faith in a place where there is skepticism, to bring hope in a place where there is despair, and to bring love in a place that's full of hatred.

And no one can do that better than our spiritual leaders, and the governments that despise freedom know that, and this is why they so viciously attack our spiritual leaders, which is why this is so important, which is why I am so honored to be here and to count with the testimony of people that I truly respect, like our great Antunez, who spent 17 years in prison; Rosa Maria Paya, who has so valiantly defended as an international forum in keeping alive the memory of her father.

So I thank the commissioners for making the decision, and I hope to welcome you, and you have a home here in Miami.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Good morning and thank you for attending the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba.

I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses and all of our in-person and online attendees for joining us for this important discussion.

And I would like to thank the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora, Director Felipe, and others for providing this great venue for us so thank you for being here and thank you for hosting us.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international

standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

One of our longstanding recommendations is that the U.S. government would encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation to USCIRF for unrestricted visas. In lieu of such an invitation, we chose to bring this hearing to Miami.

Traveling here presented a remarkable opportunity for USCIRF to speak directly with Cubans and with members of the Cuban diaspora about the increasingly repressive situation that Cuba's religious communities face.

USCIRF has included Cuba in its annual report each year since 2004. In our 2023 Annual Report, we document the Cuban government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of

religious freedom in 2022, and for the first time recommended that the State Department designate Cuba as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, which the State Department also did for the first time in November of 2022.

Unfortunately, religious freedom conditions in Cuba continue to worsen. The Cuban government tightly controls religious activity through surveillance, harassment of religious leaders and laypeople, forced exile, fines, and ill treatment of religious prisoners of conscience.

Religious leaders and groups that are unregistered or conduct unsanctioned religious activity, as well as journalists reporting on religious freedom conditions, face relentless oppression from the Office of Religious Affairs in Cuba, or ORA, and state security forces.

I will now turn the floor over to Commissioner Frank Wolf to share some concerning religious freedom trends and trends USCIRF is tracking in Cuba.

And let me just say before I turn it over to Commissioner Frank Wolf, this man has almost singlehandedly in the United States and around the world promoted international religious freedom.

He is the architect of the 1998 legislation in many ways that gave rise to this work. There is a subsequent act called the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act that was passed in 2010 that expands the authority of this Commission and recommends other strengthening approaches by the U.S. government to issues of international religious freedom.

We have him to thank for so much in this arena. It's an honor to sit at this desk with him, at this table with him, and it's an honor to serve on the Commission with him. I give you former Congressman, now Commissioner Frank Wolf.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you and thank you, Fred.

I want to thank Vice Chair Davie and thank

him for his comments and for his commitment to really make a difference in this issue.

I also want to join you in welcoming everybody here that's at the hearing today.

In our recent monitoring of religious freedom in the country, we find that the Office of Religious Affairs, or, as Fred said, ORA, continues to enforce a variety of restrictions on religious activity. Religious organizations in the country are required, required to apply to the Ministry of Justice, where the ORA is housed, for registration.

Despite existing criteria, registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory. Unregistered religious groups are particularly vulnerable to official harassment, as membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime.

The ORA also exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations, requiring their permission for virtually any activity other than regular

worship service.

The Cuban government regularly targets members of religious communities who have refused to abide by strict regulations set out by ORA. Authorities subject pastors to detention, interrogation, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscations of property.

USCIRF received reports indicating that Cuban authorities detained and interrogated citizens who traveled or planned to travel to the United States in 2022, and also arbitrarily barred an imam from traveling to Mecca for the hajj.

I'd like to now pass the floor over to my fellow commissioner, Stephen Schneck, who will highlight some cases from USCIRF's Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner Wolf.

It's an honor to be here today, and I too would like to thank our host, the American Museum

of the Cuban Diaspora, for having us today.

USCIRF is required by Congress to maintain a list of certain victims of religious persecution, our Victims List. This includes those in prison due to their faith-based activity or religious freedom advocacy.

To fulfill that mandate, USCIRF created the Freedom of Religion or Belief, FoRB, Victims List, which you can find on our website.

There are currently eight Cubans on the FoRB Victims List, four Protestants and four Santeria practitioners, who are members of the independent and unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba.

I would like to take a moment to highlight one case that is illustrative of the Cuban government's crackdown on people of faith.

Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo of the independent Monte de Sion Independent Church participated in the July 11, 2021 protests. Authorities detained him that day. In the months

since his detention, Rosales Fajardo endured beatings, degrading treatment by prison guards, and the denial of familial contact.

The government sought to impose a ten-year sentence and tried him in December on charges of "disrespect," "assault," "criminal incitement," and "public disorder."

Rosales Fajardo was sentenced to eight years in prison, though his sentence was reduced by one year in May.

In June of last year, it was reported that Rosales Fajardo's appeal had been rejected. His wife has been threatened with imprisonment herself if she continues to speak out publicly about her husband's case.

The government has targeted the pastor for over a decade because of his leadership of an unregistered church in the city of Palma Soriano.

In 2009, government authorities confiscated his family home, which also served as their church.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the same officer who was involved in the confiscation now holds a position in the Ministry of Interior and was responsible for the decision to charge and imprison Pastor Lorenzo. Rosales Fajardo's story is one that is too common in Cuba.

Let me now address this morning's audience with a specific request. If you know of any individuals who have been targeted due to their faith-based activity or advocacy in Cuba, and should be included on USCIRF's FoRB Victims List, I invite you today to log onto the USCIRF website and submit information to us for our review.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Davie.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

I would like to briefly introduce the witnesses for our first panel. Each person's full biography can be found in the printed handouts and on USCIRF's website.

We will first hear from Rosa Maria Paya Acevedo, Director of Cuba Decide, and then to be followed by Dr. Teo Babun, President and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas.

Welcome, Ms. Paya, and the floor is yours.

MS. PAYA: Thank you so much.

It is an honor to have this opportunity to address the Commission and each one of you in a very serious and grave problem that we have been facing for 64 years, but we have seen deteriorated in the last years.

The Commission encouraged me to talk about the suppression of civil, human and political liberties, also to give recommendations on what the U.S. government could do, and a brief overview on what our platform is.

It is a nonconfessional civic platform, but we have the honor of also have among our promoters many religious leaders. Some of them are here today.

One of the most unfair ideas created by

the propaganda of the Cuban Communist Party and its agencies is that citizens are happy there despite repression of human, civil, and political rights.

The truth is that since the beginning, the Cuban people have continuously rebelled against the injustice imposed by the state, and since 2020, citizen mobilization and peaceful protests against the government have intensified, shattering the myth of the submission of the Cuban people and unmasking the brutality of the regime to the whole world through the lens of the cellphones and the reach of the Internet.

The state's political repression and violence have become widespread, particularly after the mass protests that began on July 11, 2021.

Despite the repression during 2022, at least 3,000 more pro-democracy protests were held through the island.

The most conservative data from organizations that monitor human rights in Cuba document more than 1,000 political prisoners,

including at least 130 women and 30 minors.

The State Security Forces and the police aggressively suppress freedom of expression, assembly and peaceful demonstrations by ordinary citizens, regardless of their affiliation with opposition religious and civic organizations.

Today, in Cuba, there are people sentenced to prison for sharing a post in Facebook. The state exercises violence everyday against citizens, and that is to say that the government that exists in Cuba systematically exercises state terrorism against its own people because the violence exercised against the citizens has the goal of infusing panic among the population and that's the concept of terrorism.

One of the cases registered by the Fundacion Democracia Panamericana's Incidents Report Center is that of the Navarro family. In July 2021, Felix Navarro, president of the "Pedro Luis Boitel" Party for Democracy and promoter of Cuba Decide, was arbitrarily detained along with

his daughter, Sayli Navarro.

They sought information at the police station in their municipality of Matanzas about individuals that were detained in the peaceful demonstrations that took place the day before.

Felix was sentenced to nine years in prison and Sayli was sentenced to eight years by a court that did not adhere to any minimum standards of independence and impartiality.

In a similar situation, Jose Daniel Ferrer, who was recently held incommunicado for more than three months in prison, and his family upon seeing him denounced alarmingly the deteriorated health of him due to terrible conditions, and the physical and psychological torture to which authorities had subjected him.

For decades, the Cuban regime has suppressed religious freedom and persecuted men and women of faith, who dare to have a public and social expression consistent with their religious values.

My father, Oswaldo Paya, and Harold Cepero, both committed laymen, were assassinated by agents of the Cuban dictatorships on July 22, 2012.

After more than ten years, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has finally published its report holding the Cuban state responsible for the death of both opposition leaders.

All religious groups continue to be restricted from undertaking social actions, educational activities, or accessing mass media.

The Patmos Institute's 2022 report denounces the Office of Religious Affairs, ORA, a part of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party that has been the highest authority responsible for these violations and holds a monopoly over religious activities, monitoring, blocking, distorting, persecuting and obstructing them.

Many pastors and believers are frequently subject to police summons, fines, searches,

confiscations, threats and coercion.

Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo was brutally tortured by the authorities in the prison, and he has remained in prison under concerning circumstances since 2021 as well as Catholic layman Angel Mesa Rodriguez.

Now let's turn our attention to the actions that the U.S. government and the Congress could take that would possibly affect religious freedoms in Cuba.

The first one of them, in our opinion, is that the United States should not negotiate with the regime but instead demand, confirm, and confirm the unconditional release of all political prisoners, the end to repression, and respect for freedom of expression, association, religious, and economic freedom.

The United States should demand the implementation of all necessary measures to enable the people to express themselves and to decide sovereignly on a transition to a democratic system

that the Cuban people have been demanding in the streets.

We propose this through a binding plebiscite leading to free, fair, and multi-party elections.

Moreover, the United States should apply targeted sanctions, utilizing the Global Magnitsky Act against top officials and individuals involved in human rights abuses in Cuba, as well as their corrupt family members and their proxies.

The U.S. should target those who violate religious freedom in Cuba, including Caridad Diego Bello, director of the Office of Religious Affairs, ORA, and her staff and her corruption network and her proxies.

The United States should also ensure uncensored Internet access throughout the Cuban territory, overcoming the regime interference.

And the U.S. should reopen the Political Refugee Program for Cubans facing political and religious persecution and life-threatening

situations on the island.

The appeasement like approaches, like the one that is perceived from the collaboration of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba with institutions of the Cuban regime, only benefit the oppressors because dictatorships only respond to pressure.

For this reason, our movement, Cuba Decide, seeks international support for the Cuban peoples' demand for freedom and democracy.

Very briefly, Cuba Decide, a national and global initiative, focuses on mobilizing Cubans and the international community to generate the necessary pressure for the regime to give in to the sovereign will of the citizens and start a transition process.

Our roadmap consists of four simple, although hard, steps: the recognition of the human rights and fundamental guarantees; acknowledge and ensure protection of human rights and essential guarantees of all individuals in Cuba. That includes safeguarding freedom of expression,

assembly, religious freedom and civil liberties.

Second, a binding plebiscite for system change because the Cuban regime imposed constitution has the Communist Party as the director of the society and the state, and we need to change that in order to be able to start the step number three, which is a transition process, to finally be able to have free, fair and multi-party elections.

Nor the roadmap or any roadmap is going to be possible in Cuba through the transition into democracy if we are not able to generate the necessary amount of pressure over the criminals in power in Cuba for them to have to submit to the will of the people and leave. That's what we tried to build. That's what the Cuban people have been demanding, and that requires the international support because they are criminals with weapons, and they are applying and exercising a state terrorism against the citizenry.

As my father said, we are asking you, the

government, the Congress, and the people of the United States, to take sides with the Cuban people.

I'm quoting him. He said with all Cubans, and this means supporting respect for all their rights so that our people may be given a voice through the ballot box.

Thank you so much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you for your testimony, Ms. Paya. We'll be back for some questions shortly.

We'd now like to turn the floor over to Dr. Babun to get his comments as well.

DR. BABUN: Thank you very much, Chairman Davie, Congressman Commissioner Wolf, and Commissioner Schneck.

Thank you for organizing this hearing on the tragic religious freedom situation in Cuba.

I appreciate the Commission's shining a light on the systematic abuse of one of the most

fundamental freedoms. While the Cuban regime denies this abuse, all evidence is of the contrary, as you know.

I especially want to commend you for recommending that the State Department designate Cuba as a Country of Particular Concern, the category for the world's worst violators of religious freedom.

Thankfully, the State Department recognized this when it designated Cuba as a CPC country in November of last year.

As a word of introduction, I am the president and CEO of Outreach Aid to the Americas, a faith-based organization dedicated to serving vulnerable people in the Americas through humanitarian relief, development assistance, and human rights advocacy.

Unlike Rosa Maria, who is up in the technology, I had to write my speech and bring it in a hard copy over here.

[Laughter.]

DR. BABUN: OAA addresses pressing human rights concerns and advocates for religious freedom in countries with restricted regimes.

OAA has channeled its efforts towards documenting human rights violations and raising awareness about the importance of religious freedom. This strategic activity has enabled OAA to play a pivotal role in promoting positive change and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities in nations like Cuba and Nicaragua.

In Cuba, as in other countries under authoritarian rule, the downtrodden often sustains hope through their faith. Despite the regime's constant harassment, millions of Cubans regularly worship and receive spiritual guidance from religious leaders, though often they must do so in the shadows.

Cuba's faith community has filled a crucial void in the island's oppressed civil society, providing hope and spiritual support as well as social services to the most marginalized

community members who their government, which is in constant state of crisis, is unwilling or unable to reach.

Faith-based leaders frequently are in the front line of human rights defense, promoting peaceful dialogue and advocating for nonviolent democratic change.

They do so with great risk. However, the Communist regime does not tolerate criticism or challenges its authority.

As a Jewish leader said in a webinar that we just had recently, the Communists—I quote—"The Communists tell you you can believe in whatever you want, but you have to kneel in front of the dictatorship.

"You are going to believe, but I am going," speaking for the government, "I am going to put limits in your beliefs."

To better understand the Cuban government's behavior, we go back to the beginning of the regime, who in the 1960s declare itself an

atheist state, and severely persecuted churches and other religious actors, expelling many from the island, as most of you heard this morning during the tour of the wonderful American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora.

However, in the face of most Cuba's deep spiritual convictions, the Communist government retreated from its stand. In fact, Cuba was eventually visited by three Catholic pontiffs, more than any other Latin American country. Partially as a result, in 1992, the regime relaxed restrictions on religious communities and under a new constitution declared Cuba a "secular state."

Sadly, the easing of restrictions proved superficial. The government continued to systematically violate Cubans' fundamental rights to freedom of religion or belief. The regime strategy has been to control, regulate, and repress religion, and it does out of its worse treatment for churches that it refuses to recognize or to register.

Cuba's new constitution approved in only 2019 weakens the protection that existed under the old constitution. However, unlike democratic governments, the regime, which is directed by the Communist Party, rules by laws, decrees and obscure administrative orders without the slightest regard to a constitution limit or provisions.

Thus, the constitution is a non-issue in Cuba.

In a poll released last week by the NGO in Madrid—you may have heard—it was revealed that seven out of ten Cubans, or 68 percent of the population on the island, know someone who has been harassed, repressed, threatened, or obstructed in their daily life for reasons related to their faith.

The survey concluded that religious freedoms are not respected or guaranteed in Cuba. The Cuban regime continues to use its surveillance and control system to limit or persecute any public expression, especially political, of those who

assume a civic commitment in accordance with the values of their faith.

Likewise, it limits the action and social influence of religious entities or congregations, especially those that demand a greater presence in the public space and in communities.

The government's Office of Religious Affairs, ORA, part of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, known by us and others, defenders of freedom, as the religion police, as you heard earlier from Commissioner Congressman Wolf and later from Ms. Paya, regulates all matters related to religious groups, including registration, travel, building permits, import limits, and even access to Bibles and other religious scriptures.

ORA shows favoritism to certain religious groups that submit to its control, while harassing and punishing all others.

ORA and other government offices utilize shifting tactics against faith organizations, leaders and worshippers, including: harassment;

threats and physical attacks; confiscation of property; frequent police summons; accusation of illegal or immoral behavior; denial of rights of employment or education, including for family members; acts of repudiation.

It spreads public perception and hearsay. It disseminates public sentiment and gossip. It cultivates public views and speculation. It plants seeds of public opinion and rumors and misinformation to build the vision between faith groups and fabricate alleged crimes.

Thus, we see many religious people going to prison, not because they're religious, but for some fabricated crime that the government invents.

The government even creates fake organizations that supposedly represent religions. The state-run proxy organizations implement government campaigns, including internationally, to project the frontage of religious tolerance even as we saw last week in horror when Pope Francis met the president of Cuba at the Vatican, accompanied

by none other than the head of the Cuban religious police Caridad Diego—a real shock to all of us.

In closing, I would like to offer some of my organization's recommendations to USCIRF, the Department of State and the international community.

Number one, Cuba should stay on the State Department's list of Countries of Particular Concern unless conditions measurably improve.

Number two, we believe that based on the deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Cuba, the new sanctions should be directed at officials orchestrating religious repression, including through the denial of visas for travel to the U.S., the EU, and other designations, as does Cuba Decide mentioned awhile ago, as well as restrictions on international banking and investments.

The U.S. and international community should fund programs that address these issues. This includes the raising of awareness of international religious freedom guarantees,

activities to monitor and report on religious freedom violations, extensive regional and international advocacy programs that raise awareness of Cuba's religious repression, and support to on-island human rights defenders and civil rights groups.

Thank you very much to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for the opportunity to address the many challenges to religious freedoms in Cuba. Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: So we'd like to ask a few questions if we might.

I'll start and then I'll turn it to my fellow commissioners, Commissioner Wolf and Commissioner Schneck.

I'm curious or we're curious if the Cuban government in any way tries to influence or seeks to repress the views or harass Cubans who are here in the U.S.?

We've looked a lot at what we call "transnational repression," and we're just curious as to whether you or anyone you know are experiencing that kind of interference by the Cuban government here in the United States?

DR. BABUN: You like to—I'll start quickly. One of the strategies of the Cuban government, and a very Machiavellian strategy, is to use the social media as a way of publishing expressions that seem to be general expressions from the public. They have a number of individuals who are constantly publishing articles in places like Facebook and YouTube and the like.

We often see attacks or hear attacks and read attacks to some of the Cuban defenders, both those still in Cuba, particularly lately Catholic priests, who are very brave and have been speaking very strongly against the government repression, and others.

And the kind of attacks that we're hearing are not pretty. They're very, very strong attacks,

personal attacks against most of them, including some who are here today and speak against the government in the United States.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

MS. PAYA: Yes. In addition to the defamation campaign that is permanent from the Cuban regime against, against religious leaders, opposition leaders, people that have just been forced to exile, they also use their influence and their agents of influence, but also their state security agents out of Cuba to expand that repression.

Speaking from my personal experience, I have been detained in several airports in Latin America, even under the excuse of having an Interpol "red alert" on my name, and that was manipulation of the Cuban state security agents in the local airport, at Lima, for instance, just to give you an idea of the reach of the intelligence services of this regime.

And in addition to that, we are very

concerned for the influence that the regime exerts over the U.S. companies that have some kind of relationship or some kind of deal with the Cuban regime.

For instance, American Airlines has been used by the Cuban regime to stop Cuban citizens, residents on the island, with all their paperwork and totally in perfect shape. American Airlines have been used by the Cuban regime to stop them and prevent them to enter their own country.

I have experienced this in my own family on Cuba, been in Cuba, landing in Cuba, and American Airlines being their bridge that the Cuban regime used to prevent Cuban citizens, as my daughter, to enter the island.

But many other Cubans, religious and opposition leaders, have faced this in United States, and this is very concerning, and that's why we also recommend the American government and the Congress to encourage these companies to embrace sovereign principles and to engage with some sort

of social responsibility when it comes to doing what the Cuban regime asks for them or to just respect human rights and the basic rules that they respect for American citizens.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Commissioner Wolf.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Well, thank you both.

I just, when I think about this and listen to it and hear and read over, over the years, we were able to bring about religious freedom and human rights in Romania under one of the most oppressive administrations, the Ceausescu administration, there ever was. I think we need the policies of a Reagan and Pope John Paul.

But why have we failed? Why have we failed? This is a country 3,000 miles away. Here's a country 100 miles away, even less if you're in Key West. Why have we failed to bring about the changes in Cuba that we brought about in Poland and in Romania and places like that?

DR. BABUN: Congressman, it doesn't sound

pretty, but I think we failed because we've been naïve about the tremendous intelligence level and Machiavellian approach that the Cuban government uses internationally and otherwise to bring attention to itself and to give the impression that they, in fact, have freedom of religion.

A case in point: go to the United Nations, go to one of the hearings at the United Nations, look at the Cuban delegation at the United Nations. They eat up the rest of the delegations. They are smarter; they are younger; they are active.

It seems like when we go Geneva, we find that almost all of the delegations owe something to the Cuban delegation because they are so sharp in providing, in providing support and otherwise keeping any negative testimonies against them.

And that's just there. Look at what's happening in your own neighborhoods, your churches here in the United States. We haven't taken a poll, but we don't have to take a poll. You just go to a hundred churches in the United States, and

90 percent of the churches in the United States think that there's total freedom of religion in Cuba.

They've done a wonderful job, a terrible, Machiavellian job, as I call it, of creating the impression that what we know and what we gave testimony to today is completely a lie, and it's fabrication.

We just have not done enough to combat that, have not done enough to fund the programs at the State Department, at USAID, and others to give them the power to be able to work with NGOs around the world, to be able to advocate against that for which we know to be truth, which is the way in which the Cuban government operates.

We just have lost that battle, and we just need to regain, to regain control.

MS. PAYA: I'm very sorry to say this, but I do believe that you, you, the international community, including the U.S., just haven't done enough, haven't actually tried to help the Cuban

people on that demand, that is existential for what we're talking about here, which is the respect for religious freedom, which is freedom.

The Cuban people have been demanding freedom for 64 years, especially noticeable have been during the last three years with all the citizen mobilization. And we haven't had actions from the international community as the ones you just mentioned when you referred to John Paul II, Reagan and the international community to bring down the Berlin Wall, supporting the citizens of the Central and Eastern Europe.

That's not what the Cuban people have received. We haven't enjoyed the solidarity of the international community, and that's essential in a world in which in the last 16 years, there hasn't been a single example of a dictatorship transitioning into a democracy.

But what we have seen in the world in the last 16 years is the opposite. It's many democratic regimes becoming more and more

illiberal, and let's be clear, there's not going to be religious freedom in Cuba while the Cuban Communist Party is the director of the society and the state.

Communism is just not compatible with religious freedom. They cannot have pastors, priests, laymen, Yoruba practitioners, just professing their faith and their social call freely because in that moment they stop being the director of the society and the states.

So our, at least from Cuba Decide, but I believe I share this vision with the Cuban people, our demand for solidarity is our basic demand, which is freedom, and that needs, that requires pressure.

These criminals are not going to answer to appeasement. They are not going to answer to conversations about steps or cultural activities, as the one the U.S. Embassy is now undertaking on the island, while there are 1,000 political prisoners.

I'm sorry about the passion, but reality is that that's a very old fragile mafia in power that is biologically disappearing, trying to transfer power from the grandpas to the grandsons, and the U.S. and the international community have now the great opportunity that the Cuban people is putting in their hands of supporting that very specific demand for freedom.

That requires pressure, and that pressure right now could mean the difference between state terrorism and freedom, and, by the way, freedom and democracy for Cuba is essential for democratic stability, and that's also respect for religious freedom in the rest of the hemisphere, including for the national security of this country.

I will leave it there.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Well, I won't ask you another question, but I think this coming year with the presidential elections coming up, I mean the very thought that under Ceausescu, who was so evil, 3,000 miles away, we can't do this 100 miles away,

I think this needs to be an issue that both political parties come together to lay out an agenda of how you're going to do this because we hear—and now that we see Cuba building bases there from, with China's support.

So I think this is the year to make sure that human rights and religious freedom, both political parties have an agenda, have a platform, say we come together and we will bring about religious freedom and human rights in Cuba very, very soon, the same way we did in Eastern Europe and other places.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: So I think I'm getting the word, Commissioner Schneck, that we probably should move to the next panel because of time. So we will get more questions, but this has been extraordinary, extremely, extremely informative.

Don't ever apologize for the passion. We really appreciate it. And we will look forward to continuing to work with you both.

I want to express our deep appreciation for your being willing to testify today, for all the work that you do when you're not standing before the cameras, and for all the sacrifices you and others have made in the name of freedom and in the name of religious freedom. So thank you very much.

MS. PAYA: Thank you so much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Next, we will hear from Pastor Alayn Toledano, who is the leader of the Emanuel Church of the Apostolic Ministry; and Jorge Luis Garcia Perez, a human rights activist and Yoruba religious freedom advocate; and then Commissioner Schneck will read portions of testimony from Father Rolando Montes de Oca, a Catholic priest from Camaguey, Camaguey, Cuba.

So Pastor Toledano, we will start with you. Thank you.

MR. TOLEDANO: [Interpreted from Spanish.]

Good morning. My name is Alayn Toledano Valiente. I was born and raised in the city of Santiago de Cuba in a family that was practicing the Yoruba religion.

I converted to Jesus Christ when I was 21 years old, October 5, 1993, in a Church of the Assemblies of God, where I was the president of the youth for nine years, belonging then to the National Directive of Youth.

My wife and I were called to serve God completely in 1999 and we started the Church Emanuel in Santiago de Cuba, which we pastored for 23 years. In all these years, we worked, and we were able to bring up 41 churches that, thanks to God, they are still in operation in Cuba, and we are their apostles.

The Cuban regime tries to absorb everybody in the island of Cuba so that they somehow convert and be part of the repressive machinery.

They offer anything so that they serve them. Not to agree with them and not to accept

their offers is enough to become a repressive target in the island.

And it is here when the agonizing life of a trajectory that is marked by the state starts in this island.

A regime that not only enslaves, but that also brings terror and tries to reduce to nothing to each one of the opposition. The regime in this island punishes the institutions, punishes all the faithful, everybody that does not accept their ideology, taking away each one of their rights, not allowing them any position of work inside the island, being disqualified anywhere they go by military orders. There is a repression in this way.

Their children are harassed in the schools. They are shamed publicly. They are hurt, and they receive blows inside the schools, even by their teachers, as in the case of my two daughters, Berenice and Elisama.

They were constantly abused by their

teachers inside the schools. Constantly, they were threatened, to be sent to schools of conduct. These are schools that are prisons for children.

All the organisms of the Cuban regime are activated so that they repress those that are faithful. All the churches or the institutions, they're abused by the regime, charging them very high costs of electricity.

They do not allow them to build centers of assembly. They do not allow them to build homes. And if any of them finally gets a permit for a construction, they do anything that they can to try to make it void and null.

So that in this way they can provoke a crisis and just basically ruin the life of anybody that is a believer in the island. Since they came to power, they suspended the rights to the new organizations to register and to have legal rights inside the island, taking away the right to be able to operate legally and rightfully inside the island, building in this way a state of illegality

and a clandestine state of these institutions inside the island.

Who does not serve the interest of the Cuban government suffers then in their hands. And so we would like to have the right to be able to go in and out of the country, but they do not allow it.

Assure they're regulated in such a way that they cannot even go into certain cities or towns even inside the country, the island.

And many up to today suffer the abuse of not even being able to come out of their own homes so that their home is a prison because of the false idea that the streets belong to Fidel.

So this means that the streets belong to the regime. Therefore, those that are not with them do not have the right to freely walk in the streets of their country.

If this first phase does not make the person finally cede, then they go to a second phase, and that is to take away all of your

belongings under laws that are there, imposed to repress the Cuban people.

The military people bring about laws and take away their homes. They take away your land, your animals. They even try to take away from you your own children.

Many times they demolish your property so in this way they create terror among people of Cuba inside the island, and they show these repressive measures so that panic is created in the population.

And after all this, they go on to an even more dangerous phase, which is the fabrication of different things that supposedly you have done wrong in order to take away your liberty.

The regime brings you into jail and then many times they activate simulations that you are in jail. And these are undercover people that come to all of the persons that do not agree with the system, and they make them pay for it.

The life of any Cuban is in danger. Right

now we see how many like gang up and assault homes of people that have not wanted to accept the Cuban regime.

 Their homes are assaulted, and they receive blows and torture even inside their own homes.

 With any type of weapon, the police shoots to the population that demands rights. They abuse and they receive impunity backed up by supposed laws that justify these terrible acts.

 Many of the examples that I have mentioned today are not fabricated histories. We have lived them ourselves. We have lived up to five times being detained in just one week, harassing us in order to bring lack of stability even in our own family.

 Personally, I have been a victim of so many interviews that have been prolonged and prolonged by so many hours, all closed off in places that are very narrow, with a climate that is very, very hot all day long, without water, without

food, without physical protection. Today, sadly, all of my family is affected physically.

Psychologically, my family has also been abused due to the repressions of a wrongly-called revolution. Twice, we have been taken out of our homes, throwing us in the streets, in 2007 and in 2016. Our homes, all of our material goods, all of our technology, the church, in general, were demolished and all of our belongings were confiscated.

Our properties were taken away. Our temples were demolished. Our animals that we had in our home, the political police just spread it away as they wanted to.

There is no one that can come about well in front of such repression. The traumas that are caused in our children, my wife, the church, have been irreversible.

My daughters and my wife, still when they sleep at night, they jump. My wife still wakes up in the middle of the night with blood pressure 240,

almost dying. We are alive because of God's mercy.

In the island, life is in danger. The death threat is just in front of your face all the time. They start the cycle of accidents, like has happened to us many times in the roads.

In a repression wave, we start receiving assaults, repudiation acts. The vandals start assaulting your homes as our home was assaulted so many times.

A number of repression activities and blows to the pastors start happening. You have no freedom inside of the island. You have no peace; you have no rights. Everything, everything dies because of the repression of an assassin machinery called revolution.

Everything to preserve the power, those that have sequestered it. Exile is the word that starts coming into your heart whether it's your own will or most times forced by the regime itself. The true name is that we become a diaspora.

In many cases, you never go back to the

island again. And yet you have to leave behind many times your spouse, your parents, your children, your brothers, your sisters, and you just don't know when is it that you will be able to see them again.

On July 24th of 2022, along with my wife and my daughters, I had to abandon the island of Cuba. Everything that used to surround me was suffering the biddings of the Cuban dictatorship.

The dictatorship gave us 30 days to abandon the island, where we never wanted to leave. Behind left were my two other children, four grandchildren, my mother and my brothers, all of the churches and thousands of leaders, disciples, that in less than 24 hours, we couldn't see again.

We couldn't even say good-bye to many of our relatives. Today, my oldest daughter, Suzanna [ph], suffers of breast cancer. She cries daily, but I, as her dad, I cannot be with her.

No one deserves to live out of their country. No one deserves to be far from their

family to find freedom and peace. It is for this reason that today we denounce the crimes of the Cuban regime, crimes against humanity, and we ask for justice and freedom for the Cuban, for the Cuban people, the ones in the island and the ones outside of the island.

The Cuban people, they need two things. They need to have a homeland and they need to have life.

United States is the guardian of the elemental rights of the human race. Therefore, it is time that the relationship with Cuba is sustained in the principles that are going to help the Cubans to have a fair way of life.

And we propose to the Biden administration that he demands, that they demand the Cuban regime to stop repressing and incarcerating citizens only because they want to freely express themselves; that they stop the sanctions or that they stop all types of punishment and incarceration of Cubans just because they're not Communists and because

they are exposing their criteria; as to the present government, that they show with evidence in the whole world how the Cuban people can stop being in such poverty.

Given this way to the Cuban people the right to develop their own potential of work and of life; that a Cuban be able to start their own businesses; that Cuba can guarantee a federal state of law to the Cubans and not for the Communist Party.

Third, all Cuban citizens that is in jail under sanctions just because they have manifested their lack of sympathy with the government and because they demand their rights, that the Havana regime brings them into freedom completely and fast.

Fourth, that Havana establishes a fair process in order to bring change to the republic of Cuba. So that in this way, the constitution guarantees the peace and the liberty and the rights of the people and not of a party.

And five, that the Havana regime starts the process of transition in order to establish a government and a democratic system where the Cuban people can live free, and they can democratically select their own leaders that are going to be those that are that are going to preside into the Cuban government.

The Cuban people deserve to enjoy their homeland and their freedom.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Pastor Toledano.

We appreciate your testimony, and now for Mr. Garcia Perez, please, the floor is yours.

MR. PEREZ: [Interpreted from Spanish.]
Thank you very much.

The testimony that I just heard is something that is highly touching.

I know that there are many persons that are seeing us in the social network, perhaps not in

Cuba, but perhaps, not in Cuba, but, yes, many persons that have the tendency of having a left ideology.

They can probably just be surprised and say to themselves what is a black person there doing if that person was born in Cuba with such propaganda machine that is so strong.

Yes, here is a black person to talk about religious freedom and religious, and freedom of race. But here I am. My name is Jorge Luis Perez "Antunez."

I am a man that had to be 17 years and 38 days of my life in prison. My crime was that I was a black opponent in a Communist country, and even though I am a living testimony of all types of violations, religious violations and political violations, I don't come here to talk about my own personal experiences. They are very many.

I am here, however, to denounce the killing, clinically induced, of the one that my brother has been a victim of. My brother and

religious leader, Humberto Loreto Hernandez Garcia, who is in a hospital in the city of Santa Clara, where he was taken because of the worsening state of his health.

I am here also representing his wife, also political prisoner, Donaida Perez Paseiro. They are both Yoruba priests. In the moment when they went to jail in July '11, they were the president of the Asociacion Yorubas Libres de Cuba.

And though this is an event that is mainly focused in the religious topic, in the case of the Yorubas, it is actually impossible to separate the religion from the race because of the African origin and the participation of blacks in this religion.

I will start by telling you that the members are threatened in order for them to stop practicing that religion. But to really understand completely and profoundly the lack of liberty, race and also religious liberty in Cuba, in order to really understand completely the climate of

harassment, we have to first of all place ourselves in the concept that our country lives.

Cuba is a system of government that is atheism, atheist and materialistic. It is also racist. By essence, it is an enemy of God, an enemy of any belief of faith. Priests, whether they are Christian priests, Yoruba priests and the Christian pastors, be it what it be their faith, Muslims, any, anyone that practices any faith is already an enemy of the government.

The youth of my generation will never forget phrases as "religion is the opium of society." Or that you, the religious people, are the fifth column of the counterrevolution.

My nephew, the young priest, Dairon Hernandez Perez, son of the political prisoners Loreto Hernandez and Donaida Perez, he has been a victim of an intense and fierce persecution and harassment in order to force him to go to the military service in Cuba.

And with this, obviously to worsen the

pain and the situation of their incarcerated parents in Cuba. Not too long ago, when he was still just almost a child, he received a terrible beating right in the streets that left him almost unconscious.

The people of the government do not deny their hatred to religion and to their racist mentality.

My brother when he was being taken to prison, he, an officer told him this textually. Let's see if all your sayings and your religion, if they're going to bring you out of prison. We're going to eliminate you because you're black, because you're a santero, and because you do not agree with the revolution.

We have to have such a lack of human sensitivity. Someone has to be very, very cruel to tell a human that just suffered a pre-cardiac infarct, a Black counter, opponent of the revolution, we don't care about your medical condition because if it says there in your medical

record that your health is not compatible with the regime and the jail, it's even better for us.

That way you die, and it's one less mouth to feed. And this is not out of a novel or, you know, science fiction. These were the textual words of an officer of the political police said to my brother, the political prisoner and priest of the Yoruba religion, Loreto Hernandez.

But the religious persecution does not end there. Month before, an officer came to the jail and told him in provocation, I don't believe in any person that opposes the revolution and much less in religious people. And listen to these now.

For us, the only religion is the revolution and our only god is who? Fidel Castro. To which my brother Loreto replied: if you don't, if you don't believe in people that oppose the government, I also do not believe in Communists.

And if your only religion is the revolution, and if your god is Fidel, my religion is the Yoruba religion, and my god is Oggun.

He was beaten up in the hallways. He was kicked everywhere, and he was thrown down a number of stairs, and it doesn't finish there. Just a few days ago, a peaceful protest in the prison where he is, after a day, blamed him, and after they gave him another brutal beating, the high officer from the state security told him—I'm sorry about what I'm going to say, but I'm going to say it—never forget you, you Black shit, that we are going to clean our behind with your religion.

And they went to the same story. They only god is Fidel. And the only religion is the revolution. But the most genuine expression of cruelty against this person was when high officers of the political police communicated to him that even though the clinical community had approved his license, they couldn't allow it to him because of interest of the state security.

In other words, because of interest of the state police, my brother, the religious leader and the political prisoner, Loreto Hernandez, is

condemned to die in prison even though, of course, I need to say that the repression in Cuba, because of religious affairs, is not limited only to my brother and his wife. We had the cases of Lorenzo Rosales, the sisters Lisdany.

The totalitarian system are based from the premise of the devaluation and the lessening of the individual so they can manipulate them, and they can face them one against others.

I come from a country where from very young, we were used in order to mock priests, priests of the Catholic religion, and all of the people that used to be faithful or serve in church.

I am part of a generation that we needed to go to mass hiding because otherwise we were going to be in great trouble. During my years in prison, and there were many, I was a witness of Christian prisoners that were forced to just step and kick and burn the Bible.

The forced labor camps, known as UMAC, are witness of the most human misery that is lived

because of the Communists.

Today, I feel indignation when a few bring about the flag of the killing of Floyd as a fight against racism. And these followers of Floyd, they forget that precisely it was many of them, the ones that leashed out the wave of racism and violence, most critical in the last few years.

Because for many, it would seem that racism is only when the attack comes from the white to the black. But racism, the Ku Klux Klan is racist, but also the Black Panthers are racist and also the Black Lives Matter are racist. So imagine how much Floyd, how many in Cuba are being kicked right now and also are asking for oxygen, like Floyd did.

That's why I feel indignation about this posture of Biden's administration that is very strange, and many of the Democratic Party that incited the Black Lives Matter. However, many of them have not had, they have not had the courage to pronounce themselves against the victim, because of

the victims of the people that have received repression for political or religious freedom in my country.

And before I finish, I say that the regime in my country is racist by nature. They use the racial theme for convenience and for mockery. The Yoruba religion, besides being taboo, is also ridiculed.

Of course, except that the high Yoruba culture, that is cultural and political appendix of the regime, because in Cuba, the religious freedom only exists in order to support the dictatorship, but never to truly practice religion out of the government control.

For them, and for all that are victims of and are suffering lack of religion, lack of freedom of religion, political, ethnical, racial, I ask for solidarity and support.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you for your

testimony, Senora Garcia Perez.

And we'll now have some of the remarks that were submitted by Father Montes de Oca presented to us by our own Commissioner Schneck— Commissioner Schneck.

And then following this, Commissioner Schneck, why don't you ask a question of our two guests, and then we'll conclude the hearing after that.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Vice Chair Davie.

I think actually because of fact that we're a bit over time at this point, I will not read the excerpt from the extraordinary testimony from Father de Oca.

However, we will be posting that testimony on the USCIRF website, and I would encourage you to look at it. It's a very powerful statement, and I would encourage you all to look at it.

I have one question to pose to both of the witnesses, but, first, let me just say I'm here

today as an appointee of President Biden to this Commission, and I'm proud to be representing him here today. But, nevertheless, I was extraordinarily moved by the powerful testimony that I heard today, and I was inspired by the moral righteousness that I heard in the testimonies today, and I thank both the witnesses.

The brief question that I have, since both of you, both you, Pastor Toledano, and you, Mr. Garcia, still have representatives from your many churches still active in Cuba and your many practitioners of the Free Yoruba community in Cuba, what is, are they experiencing increased pressure from the government now because of your presence here in the United States today? Does your exile impact your communities in Cuba?

MR. PEREZ: [Interpreted from Spanish.] Well, yes, paradoxically, yes. Right. Actually, paradoxically, the result has been a positive result because we have become their voices.

Just to have the possibility to

participate in activities like this contributes that we can become visual, we can become real, which is something that they need over there.

The exile for us has been an extremely difficult decision. But I believe that the fact that we have maintained constant communication with all those victims has brought about a positive result.

MR. TOLEDANO: [Interpreted from Spanish.] In our case as well. I don't believe that exile is good for anyone. Families are divided. Society is divided. The ministry is divided.

But we as Cubans, we fight. And any action we try to see it and we try to convert it into something positive. That we are here does not mean that the fight is over. I don't renounce my country, and I don't renounce to what we need to do in this, in Earth here.

The realities, right now in Cuba, we have leaders that cry because we are not there. Relatives that cry, our daughters, our

grandchildren. When we see them and we talk to them by video call, we have to hold back the tears, and we have a society, a family, a church, that does not accept having to go into exile in order to reach freedom.

In our experience, exile is about the hardest thing that our family has gone through, and it's the most difficult thing that is happening right now with our people in Cuba.

This happens to any opposition leader of any, any opposition at all. This should not happen to any person. That is why any, any dialogue as far as any covenant with any dictatorship, whether it's Cuba, whether it's Venezuela, or any other dictatorship in the Earth, is not fair because there should be no covenant, no agreement of any type, that is based on the blood that so many of their children have suffered.

That's why any type of relation has to be conditioned to the benefit of the society. It cannot be a relationship that only benefits the

politics or that benefits a government. Humans, human beings are at the core, are in the core of everything.

And so anything that is outside of the wellbeing of the human being and of their blood is also a crime.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Let me thank our witnesses for their testimony, both of you and the two witnesses in the panel that preceded you.

Let me also say that many of us stand strongly in solidarity with you in the struggle for liberty and freedom in Cuba. I have to say as a Black American, as an African American, as a Presbyterian minister, as someone who has supported Black Lives Matter and the issue of George Floyd, I want to say that not all people who support that effort are racist, and that we strongly, I strongly condemn without any qualification religious and human rights oppression anywhere but particularly

in Cuba.

So I want you to know that you have solidarity with this person who supports Black Lives Matter, and you probably do with lots of others, and it would be worth an ongoing conversation and dialogue about that.

But let me thank you. Let me say again we really appreciate this crucial testimony. It's absolutely important to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief, not only in Cuba but around the world, and your testimony helps us in our ability at USCIRF, at the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, to fulfill the mission that we've been given by the government of the United States.

So, thank you, thank you for your enormous contributions and your enormous sacrifices to this effort.

Let me also thank the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora for hosting the hearing today. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And for all of the people watching this event online, we thank you as well.

And, finally, let me thank the USCIRF staff for putting all this together. Zack Udin, Jamie Staley, Veronica McCarthy, and Luke Wilson, and, of course, our Executive Director Erin Singshinsuk. So thank you, thank you all.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And finally Cuba remains a top priority for USCIRF. We ask you to visit our website for our reporting on Cuba and other countries that we monitor regularly.

And with that, and all the passion and energy and commitment and sacrifice you bring to this effort, we will call this meeting adjourned, but the effort to secure freedom of religion or belief will never adjourn. We'll continue that for as long as we need to.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 12:16 p.m. ET, the hearing
was adjourned.]