The Human Rights Situation in Present-Day Cuba

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It is a pleasure to be here with you today. I wish to thank the University of Miami, the Cuban Transition Project and Dr. Jaime Suchlicki for their kind invitation to speak with you on a subject that occupies most of my waking moments, the struggle for the respect of human rights in Cuba and the transition towards a participatory form of government. These, along with continued successful implementation of the 1994/1995 Migration Accords, remain our primary objectives in Cuba.

I am a career foreign service officer with more than 33 years of experience, mostly in Latin America and southern Europe. For the last eight months, I have been serving as the chief of mission of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. It is a unique place and the experience has so far provided me with some of the most interesting tales I will have to tell about my service to my country.

But a month ago, I would have started this speech by drawing attention to the fact that the Cuban people had managed to preserve their fundamental dignity in the face of more than four decades of repressive rule. Today, I must say that dignity is being stretched very thin. With its recent crackdown against human rights activists and the country’s nascent civil society, the Castro regime has shown that it is willing to risk even the ire of the international community to maintain its central role. I say the government is repressive because no one I deal with on a regular basis in Cuba says otherwise. And in fact, all of our allies agree that their policy goal in Cuba is, ultimately, the same as ours; the rapid and peaceful transition to a democratic government characterized by strong support for human rights and an open market economy.

Before I get to the heart of my remarks, I’d like to discuss recent events that have a direct impact on our efforts to support safe, orderly and legal migration.

As you are aware, there have been six hijackings in the last six months, three of which occurring over the last three weeks. I want to take this opportu-
nity to reiterate: Any individual of any nationality—including Cuban—who hijacks an aircraft or vessel to the United States will be prosecuted with the full force of the U.S. legal system. Individuals convicted of such offenses can expect to serve lengthy sentences in federal penitentiaries. Once convicted of such an offense, any individual—including a Cuban—would be rendered permanently ineligible for lawful permanent residence in the United States. I want to reaffirm the U.S. Government’s commitment that only safe, legal and orderly migration take place from Cuba to the United States.

In addition to the migration-related events of the last month, there have also been important political developments that have a direct bearing on the people of Cuba and U.S. policy:

1. President Castro returned from his Asian tour and declared his intention to remain in power for the rest of his life.
2. During the same speech, Castro signaled his desire to clamp down on the activities of the Cuban opposition and of the U.S. Interests Section.
3. True to his word, on March 18 Castro launched the biggest crackdown in over a decade against human rights activists and independent journalists.
4. As of this date, at least 75 democracy advocates have been added to the rolls of hundreds of political prisoners already in Cuban jails.
5. In a series of summary trials last week, the Government of Cuba has convicted economists for being economists, civil rights activists for being civil rights activists, journalists for being journalists and librarians for being librarians.

I say this not to make light of their situations, but to highlight the fact that in Cuba today, activities considered normal in any other country will result in life in prison in Cuba.

The arrests and convictions, coldly calculated to take place while the world’s attention was focused elsewhere, were aimed at dismantling the independent journalist movement, crippling Project Varela, and decapitating the Assembly to Promote Civil Society. This latest group of detainees includes leading civil society figures such as Martha Beatriz Roque, Raul Rivero, Hector Palacios, and Oscar Espinoza Chepe. Many members of Oswaldo Paya’s Christian Liberation Movement, including Antonio Diaz, Jose Daniel Ferrer, and Efren Fernandez, were also jailed. The Cuban Government has tried these so-called “traitors” on serious charges, with penalties of up to life in prison.

I will discuss this issue further within the context of my remarks. This morning, I wish to share with you what I have learned from my discussions with long term observers of the Cuban scene, third-country diplomats based in Cuba, my own observations gleaned from travels throughout the country—having traveled more than 6,000 miles—and, most importantly, my extensive conversations with Cuban citizens.

I will tell you about what we are seeing in Cuba today, the current socio-economic and political conditions in Cuba and the efforts of Cuban citizens to