

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement

**Rep. Stephen F. Lynch, Ranking Member**

**Hearing on “Holding Cuban Leaders Accountable”**

**June 20, 2018**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank you for holding this hearing to examine the state of human rights in Cuba. I'd also like to thank today's witnesses for helping this Subcommittee with its work.

Let me begin by expressing my sincere sorrow to the families of the four U.S. crew members whose civilian aircraft was shot down in 1996 by Cuban fighter jets during a humanitarian service mission with Brothers to the Rescue. Ms. Miriam de la Peña, the mother of U.S. pilot Mario de la Peña, and Ms. Ana Alejandre Cierieszko, the sister of U.S. pilot Armando Alejandre, are here with us today and I thank you both for your willingness and strength in offering this Subcommittee your important perspectives on human rights accountability in Cuba.

It is clear that the republic of Cuba remains an authoritarian state whose citizens are subjected to the widespread abuse of human rights by their government. Over the past decade alone, the U.S. State Department has consistently reported serious human rights violations that include the use of threats, physical assault, detentions, and intimidation by the government as a means of limiting the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly or silencing political opposition. Cuban authorities have also routinely engaged in the monitoring or private communications and limitations on freedom of the press. As underscored by the State Department, the free exercise of these and other civil liberties is prohibited in the Cuban Constitution when contrary to the “*existence and objectives of the socialist state.*” Moreover, the government has sought to prevent workers from forming independent trade unions and place stringent restrictions on worker rights. According to the State Department, the majority of human rights abuses have been committed at the direction of the Cuban government with impunity.

This year witnessed the transition to a new government in Cuba with the resignation of President Raúl Castro and the selection by the Cuban National Assembly of Vice President Miguel Díaz-Canel to succeed him as president. While President Castro will remain as leader of the Cuban Communist Party through 2021, the inauguration of President Díaz-Canel marked the first time since the 1959 Cuban Revolution that a Castro is not leading the government.

In the midst of this political transition, it is imperative that we continue to address the Cuban government's repression of human rights by building upon the renewed U.S. engagement with Cuba that began during the Obama administration and which has been left largely intact under

President Trump. We must further develop a U.S.-Cuba policy that underscores and reflects our longstanding commitment to the advancement and protection of international and universal human rights. This must include the continuation of the bilateral human rights dialogue with Cuban officials that began in 2015 as well as meaningful funding for efforts undertaken by the U.S. Agency for International Development, State Department, and other agencies to support human rights and the development of a democratic and civil society in Cuba. While President Trump proposed zeroing out funding for Cuban democracy programs for fiscal year 2018, the bipartisan Omnibus Appropriations Bill enacted by Congress in March ultimately provided \$20 million dollars in funding – the same as fiscal year 2017.

Our Cuba policy going forward must also work to ensure the safety of U.S. diplomatic personnel deployed on the island. In the aftermath of still-unexplained injuries suffered by at least 24 employees at the U.S. Embassy in Havana in November of 2016, the State Department ordered the departure of all non-emergency embassy personnel and their families to mitigate their exposure to “*attacks of an unknown nature.*” However, in March of this year, the State Department announced a permanent staffing plan at U.S. Embassy, Havana under which the mission will now operate “*with the minimum personnel necessary to perform core diplomatic and consular functions.*” We must make every effort to keep these personnel safe.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to discussing these and other important issues relating to U.S.-Cuba relations with today’s witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman – I yield back the remainder of my time.

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