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## Cuba Asks to Bring the UN to Guantanamo

by LADB Staff

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In March, Honduras presented, at the behest of the US, a proposal written by the US petitioning the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to ask Cuba to allow a human rights relator to visit the island. This is an annual affair for the US (see NotiCen, 2003-05-08). But now, Cuba has turned the tables, and has asked Honduras to sauce the goose as it had the gander.

"The United Nations Commission on Human Rights, composed of 53 States, meets each year in regular session in March/April for six weeks in Geneva. Over 3,000 delegates from member and observer States and from non-governmental organizations participate," according to the commission's website. Cuban Ambassador to Tegucigalpa Elis Alberto Gonzalez Polanco told reporters on April 18 that he had delivered a petition to the Cancilleria de Honduras requesting support for dispatching a special Human Rights Relator of the UN to the UN military base in Guantanamo.

The Ambassador said the request detailed the reasons for the UN action. He said, "We hope that Honduras, which proclaims its fight for human rights, supports our proposal for the investigation of the situation in Guantanamo." The Cuban announcement came just after the Catholic weekly publication in Honduras, *Fides*, called upon Amnesty International and the International Red Cross to examine conditions among the more than 600 prisoners said to be locked up there. It came at a time of Geneva-induced heightened tension between the two Caribbean nations, just a couple of days since the UN vote went nominally against Cuba, 22 in favor of the resolution, 21 against, and 10 abstaining.

### *There are limits, and there are limits*

Cuba had sought to punish Honduras for doing the US's bidding by refusing to receive a Honduran negotiating team seeking to delineate maritime limits between the two countries, an important exercise for Honduras (see NotiCen, 2003-05-22). Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, speaking via telephone on Honduran radio station HRN said relations "are tense," and therefore, "Cuba will not receive the official Honduran delegation that is ready to travel to Havana to start the conversations..." In agreeing to do the US dirty work, President Ricardo Maduro earned the appellation, "janitor" from member of his own country's Comision de Relaciones Exteriores of the Congreso Nacional, Ramon Villeda Bermudez.

The Cuban request to Honduras came just prior to revelations of US mistreatment, humiliation, torture and murder of its prisoners in Iraq. Senior defense officials said on May 5 that 25 Iraqi and Afghan war prisoners have died in US custody in the last 17 months. The officials did not give details, but said these 25 people were among were among 35 cases of prisoner abuse by US soldiers.

As the best laid plans of the US in Iraq go seriously awry, the Cuban request for a UN investigation at Guantanamo coincides with Bush Administration efforts to get the world body to take an expanded role in its war.

### *Support from unexpected quarters*

Some US soldiers though, might welcome the Cuban initiative. Some of the sharpest attacks against the Guantanamo operation have come from uniformed US military lawyers charged with defending the prisoners there. These lawyers have denounced the military tribunals in which they must defend as fundamentally flawed and unfair. At Oxford University in London last month, Lt. Cmdr Charles Swift and Major Mark Bridges told an audience the tribunals were not capable of producing a fair and just result. The day before the two lawyers made their remarks to hundreds of listeners, Marine Major Michael Mori, another defense lawyer, told a London news conference, "The system is not set up to provide even the appearance of a fair trial. Mori is defending a Guantanamo prisoner who is neither Iraqi nor Afghani, but rather Australian.

The recent global outcry against US treatment of prisoners justifies Cuba's strategy in making this request. It had earlier presented the proposal at Geneva in response to the US-Honduras initiative, but quickly retired the request. Analysts have pointed out that, had the motion failed at the annual human rights meeting, Cuba would not have been able to propose it again. Now there may be sufficient global outrage to pass it.

Honduran Foreign Minister Leonidas Rosa Bautista responded publicly to the Cuban initiative on April 19, with a commitment on the part of the government to "evaluate" the petition. "At this time we are making an evaluation, but we do not yet have an exact date when we will make that decision," he told reporters.

Two days later, President Ricardo Maduro spoke to the question of his moral authority to support the resolution. "It seems to me that those countries that propose that have to be trustworthy. Honduras has received a human rights commission, and will receive one in two weeks," he said. "We have received a mission from Transparencia Internacional, which has also qualified us to present this type of resolution."

On April 27, Cuba delivered a second draft of its request. "We presented the resolution plan in its second revision, which has been registered with the United Nations on the 'Question of Arbitrary Detentions in the Area of the United States Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba,'" Gonzalez Polanco told reporters. He said Cuba is confident of presenting this new resolution sometime in July or August to the Human Rights Commission, but could instead present it to the general assembly in November.

The November strategy would have the advantage of a secret vote. He emphasized that his government's handling of the resolution in Geneva "does not take away the right to present the resolution again, it does not take away the reasons." The diplomat summed up the complaint, saying that in Guantanamo "there are 600 prisoners of more than 40 nationalities who speak 17 languages, deprived of family visits and of a just way to define if they are terrorists or not." He mentioned also

that they are still being subjected to long interrogations despite having been there for two years or more, and asked, "What recent and valid information can be obtained from those prisoners?"

"What Cuba is asking," he continued, "is that a relator come to inspect, to see all that, and to ask the government of the United States to give an answer to the international community as to when these people will have the right of every human being to receive fair treatment and due process."

-- End --