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Cuba To Permit Human Rights Monitoring; U.S.-led Critics Downplay Cuban Gains

by LADB Staff

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Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque announced on Dec. 10 that his country would sign the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. This represents a reversal of a policy of refusal to sign taken when the UN adopted the pacts at the height of the Cold War in 1976. Signing will happen in March and will be followed in early 2009 by acceptance of UN human rights monitoring.

The two documents taken together make up the UN Bill of Human Rights. They are legally binding protocols, committing Cuba to a number of things, among them freedom of expression and association and the right to travel abroad. Cuba resisted the monitoring during the period before the UN Human Rights Council came into being, when the old UN Human Rights Commission was the scene of annual attempts at censure, never quite successful, orchestrated by the US. "This decision reflects our desire for full cooperation with the United Nations on the basis of respect for our national sovereignty and the right of the Cuban people to their self-determination," said Perez Roque.

None of this is meant to suggest, however, that the human rights-based gamesmanship with the US is anywhere near over. Minutes after Perez Roque spoke to reporters, dissenters, whom Cuba calls mercenaries of the US, staged a rally to mark International Human Rights Day. According to reports, two demonstrators were detained as Cuban government supporters shouted them down, and ten women from Spain demanding the release of people they called political prisoners told the US press that they were being confined to their hotels and that police had taken their passports pending their deportation to Spain.

The women were members of the *Convergencia Democratica Catalunya*, who had come to join a group known as the *Damas de Blanco* (Ladies in White), who dress in white and walk in silent protest for their incarcerated relatives. Spanish Embassy personnel accompanied them until they boarded the aircraft that took them from the island. Like other countries, Cuba does not permit tourists to meddle in internal affairs. "Neither the manipulations that the US government has staged, sometimes with a handful of mercenaries it pays and directs in our country...nor its pressures on other countries will alter our course," commented Perez.

Meanwhile, the Spanish women could not have been more delighted with their treatment and deportation and the manipulative opportunities they presented. Upon arrival home in Catalonia, Francina Vila told the BBC, "We wanted to draw attention, and in fact we're very glad because we got a bigger response than we expected. We knew that, if we carried out this kind of action in Cuba, at some point they could arrest us or, as was the case, keep us shut up in our hotel without the chance to go out."

Cuba has already begun to ease into the human rights inspection process with the visit in November from Jean Ziegler, UN special rapporteur on the right to food. Ziegler gave the country good marks for seeing that no one went hungry despite the US embargo and the long-term economic crisis that has beset the country for much of the time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The rapporteur told reporters, "Cuba serves as an example to many other countries" for its success in feeding its people during difficult times. He also lauded the country for its low infant-mortality rate 5.3 per 1000 live births calling it "formidable," and noting, "You have already surpassed the goals" of the Millennium Challenge Account (see NotiCen, 2005-02-10).

Cuba well-developed, says UN

In other news that Cuba considers a human rights success, a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, the 2007/2008 Human Development Report, placed Cuba 51st of 177 countries, high enough to earn a place on the High Human Development list. Cuba also received the Premio Nacional de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala from Guatemala's Comision Presidencial Coordinadora de la Politica del Ejecutivo en Materia de Derechos Humanos (COPREDEH) for its medical missions there.

The Human Development Report has published the human development index (HDI) each year since 1990. It looks, says its introduction, "beyond GDP to a broader definition of well-being." It produces a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: "living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), being educated (measured by adult literacy and enrollment at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level), and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity, PPP, income)."

Cuba was in 51st position with an index of .838. The index accounts for the enormous differences among countries by using a human poverty index (HPI-1), which "represents a multi-dimensional alternative to the US\$1 a day (PPP US\$1) poverty measure." On the HPI-1, Cuba ranked 6th among 108 developing nations for which it has been calculated. The HPI-1 measures severe deprivation in health by the proportion of people who are not expected to survive to age 40. Education is measured by the adult illiteracy rate. Decent standard of living is measured by the unweighted average of people without access to an improved water source and the proportion of children under age 5 who are underweight for their age.

The index incorporates a gender-related development index (GDI), used to capture "inequalities in achievement between women and men. It is simply the HDI adjusted downward for gender inequality. The greater the gender disparity in basic human development, the lower a country's GDI relative to its HDI. Cuba's GDI value, 0.839, should be compared to its HDI value of 0.838. Its GDI value is 100.1% of its HDI value. Out of the 156 countries with both HDI and GDI values, only one country has a better ratio than Cuba's, the island nation of Maldives.

The gender empowerment measure (GEM) shows whether women take an active part in economic and political life. It tracks the share of seats in parliament women hold, number of senior officials, managers, professional and technical workers. It also tracks gender disparity in earned income to reflect economic independence. With a value of 0.661 on the GEM, Cuba ranked 26th of 93 countries.

Finally, the HDR tracks a country's contribution to climate change. The report noted that the world currently spews emissions at twice the rate that could be considered sustainable. Since ultimately this contribution will determine whether human development will continue at any level, it is perhaps the most fundamental of the report's measures. "With 0.2% of the world's population, Cuba accounts for 0.1% of global emissions, an average of 2.3 tons of CO₂ per person," said the report. "These emission levels are below those of Latin America and the Caribbean. If all countries in the world were to emit CO₂ at levels similar to Cuba's, we would exceed our sustainable carbon budget by approximately 3%."

The report noted that Cuba has signed and ratified the Kyoto Protocol. As a non-Annex 1 Party, it is not bound by specific targets for greenhouse-gas emissions. These achievements and others like them are the variables upon which the Cuban state and the citizens who support it construct a self-image as a country that takes care of its people and their well-being, hence not a systematic violator of human rights.

Human rights from the Cuban point of view

On Dec. 10, Human Rights Day, veteran Cuban columnist Francisco Rodriguez Cruz quoted the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." For Cubans, he wrote, commemoration of the adoption of the declaration 59 years ago "places upon us the duty to honestly and in a measured way review how much we have done and how much remains in the work of constructing an increasingly more just society."

Rodriguez Cruz then reviewed Cuban progress, citing the UNDP data and the award from Guatemala, and launched a critique of the way the international media covered these achievements. "The international press will say little or nothing of such recognition of the little socialist island. In this selfish world of global capitalism, the powerful not only seek hegemonic control of material wealth but also of the symbols of the greatest ideals of humanity." Working from the Cuban point of view and socialist understanding of human rights, the columnist goes on to lament the besmirching of the rights vocabulary, terms including human rights, liberty, democracy, "by the fraudulent and manipulative discourse of those who hold a discriminatory and exclusive power in societies where money is the spurious measure of the value of persons."

As the columnist was enumerating his country's accomplishments, The Miami Herald was covering the story of Cuba's signing of the human rights conventions from an entirely different perspective. It reported the facts but hastened to assert that "the move doesn't mean much because the UN council recently made two important changes that strengthened Cuba's hand and limited the ability to monitor its record," attributing the criticism to "activists." This was a reference to the June 2007 action of the UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 5/1, which extended mandates, except for those of Belarus and Cuba, "until they are next considered by the Human Rights Council and the review is taken," according to the Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights.

In the Herald story, there was no mention of Cuba's showing on the UNDP rankings, none on the award from Guatemala, but rather a liberal sprinkling of quotes from exile organizations like the Miami-based Cuban Democratic Directorate to the effect that "it's a terrible situation. Now they feel they can do whatever they want and nobody can say a thing. The victims have been silenced." International media accounts also conflated the announcement of the signing with the arrests of the Spanish demonstrators and of another tiny demonstration.

Struggling mightily to make the worst of the incident, the Herald intoned, "According to an AP account, while Perez Roque spoke, dozens of people in plain clothes assembled in a nearby park, anticipating the protest that began when [Darsi] Ferrar, a veteran activist, locked arms with four others and marched silently along the park's perimeter. Their ranks eventually grew to 14." Of these activists, the ones on the island, Rodriguez writes, "Even in our own country, the little mercenary bunches that receive a salary from the United States government try to 'capitalize' in favor of their grim interests on a battle as noble and legitimate as is the defense of human rights. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the history of Cuba this minority annexist tendency has nothing to do with the struggle for social justice, which is at the root of our Marti independence."

As for the lifting of the UN's special observation of Cuba, on the island, it was, in Rodriguez Cruz's words, "as the Foreign Ministry said at the time, a 'historic victory' after two decades of intense diplomatic struggle against that discriminatory exercise during which the United States tried to 'sanctify' its political genocide of the blockade against our people, rejected almost unanimously by the international community." Still, there is much to be done, even in a society where human rights are about economic and social justice rather than property rights and market freedoms. The columnist sees a long row to hoe in Cuba until the collective imagination is purged of the last vestiges of "racial discrimination, machismo, homophobia, or physical or psychological violence against women."

Agreement on those points could bridge the void between Cuban socialist and bourgeois understandings of human rights. But Rodriguez widens the breach again when he insists, "We must, furthermore, eliminate all those possible differences in opportunities for personal realization beyond those that stem from the real merit of the individual."

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