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LADB Staff

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UN Celebrates 17th Annual Landslide Vote Against US-Cuba Policy

by LADB Staff

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Cuba has once again appealed to the UN to lift the US blockade against it. This time the island may stand a better chance of getting something more than a near-unanimous condemnation of the US policy without any real change. This year, the president of the General Assembly is Nicaraguan Miguel d'Escoto, a long-time Sandinista with ties to the island and to its leaders, the brothers Castro.

D'Escoto came out strongly for lifting the blockade and called it a "sick obsession" of Washington. "Simply," said the diplomat and Catholic priest, "the United States government does not tolerate the existence of a place like Cuba that rises up as a heroine of solidarity and defender of values that the world needs for the survival of the human species." He made the remarks to the General Assembly on the eve of the annual vote to end the blockade. D'Escoto told the members, "On several occasions, I have asked what purpose does the assembly serve when votes with an overwhelming majority that reflect 95% of the members of the UN are ignored in an Olympic manner?"

Also speaking before the vote was Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. He said that the next US president would be the one to admit the blockade was a failed policy. As for the blockade itself, Perez Roque said it was the "main obstacle to Cuba's development, more immediately to recovery from the estimated US\$5 billion to US\$8 billion in damage from the two mighty hurricanes, Gustav and Ike." Like d'Escoto, Perez invoked the vocabulary of psychopathology to describe the policy, speaking of "irrational persecution against North American companies, banks, and citizens and those of third countries" that did business with the island. Cuba has estimated the cost of these reprisals at about US\$250 million in annual foreign investment. D'Escoto, indicating he was fed up with failure to act on the results of votes, said that this year's agenda would support an effort to strengthen the assembly.

For 17 years running, the General Assembly has voted against the blockade. Last year, 184 of the 192 members voted against it (see NotiCen, 2007-11-08). This year, on Oct. 29, 185 voted against it. Only the US, Israel, and Palau voted to retain the blockade. But the vote is nonbinding. Nothing really must be done about a policy that is said to have cost Cuba over US\$93 billion since its inception at the hand of President John F. Kennedy on Feb. 7, 1962.

US elections offer some hope

While neither of the two major US presidential contestants Barack Obama and John McCain is expected to carry on the policy with the vehemence demonstrated by the administration of President George W. Bush, both are on record as favoring continued economic and other restrictions. McCain is perhaps closer to the current policy, having said there could be an easing once there is confidence

"that the transition to a free and open democracy is being made." Obama is slightly less punitive. He has reportedly said he would talk without preconditions with President Raul Castro, but there would be no lifting until the leadership "begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change."

Reflecting the impending US elections, a critic, Sarah Stephens of the Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA), was quoted saying, "Six days before the presidential election, the world voted on our Cuba policy and we lost in a landslide. The next US president should break from the past." Despite the candidates' equivocating, Perez Roque has said his government expects the next US president will bow to international sentiment and lift the blockade. The foreign minister told the Associated Press, "We expect that the new president will change the policy toward Cuba after nearly 50 years." He said that, after the election, "we hope for the full normalization in the relations between Cuba and the United States."

US voters have hinted they might be nudging the next president toward that break. Analysts have opined that a south Florida dynasty built on the blockade could be drawing to an end. US Rep. Lincoln Diaz Balart (R-FL) and his brother Rep. Mario Diaz Balart (R-FL) appear to be losing in their re-election bids. It is anticipated they will lose if Obama, who less than a week before the election is ahead in Florida, drags their opponents in on his coattails.

Polls have the Democratic challengers leading. A result like that, say observers, would fundamentally change the Florida anti-Cuban dynamics. Said Dario Moreno of the Metropolitan Center of Florida International University (FIU), "The biggest factor in this race is the non-Cuban Hispanics who are not necessarily loyal to the GOP." US Cuba policy hurts other nations as well. In separate actions, several coalitions of nations within the UN have denounced the blockade both as part of the General Assembly and on their own. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has done so, noting that the policy damages not only Cuba but is also an impediment to regional development.

Speaking to the General Assembly for CARICOM, Guyana's UN Ambassador George Talbot said that Cuba, as the largest and most populous of Caribbean states, is integral to the overall pan-Caribbean developmental process and that historical ties are strong, including many joint programs in trade, health, infrastructure, and human development. CARICOM pledged its continued support of the Cuban people's right to self-determination and called the blockade an anachronism making no sense in the 21st century. Talbot's remarks ended with an acknowledgment of the value of both the US and Cuba as producers of great academics, scientists, and leaders, and the hope for a new beginning between two great nations, one big, the other small.

A second group demanding an end to the situation was the G-77 aggregation of underdeveloped nations. Speaking for that group was the ambassador from Antigua and Barbuda, John Ashe. He reiterated the harm done and rejected the use of coercive economic measures to prevent countries' exercise of sovereign rights. Finally, there was the Non-Aligned Nations (NAN) movement. Egyptian Ambassador Maged A. Abeelaziz stood for these 118 countries to condemn what he called arbitrary policies and to assert that no people may be deprived of their own means of subsistence and development. He said the group does not recognize, adopt, or implement unilaterally imposed coercive sanctions or extraterritorial laws, and he recalled the material damage suffered by countries other than Cuba by virtue of these. The ambassador went on to charge these measures constitute

violations of the UN Charter, international law, multilateral system of trade, and rules and principles of friendly relations among states. He claimed a right to compensation for damage suffered as a result of US policy.

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