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Cuban Government Says US Pressured for Human Rights Resolution

by LADB Staff

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The UN Human Rights Commission voted April 18 in Geneva to condemn Cuba for human rights violations. The US lobbied hard to line up votes for the Czech-sponsored resolution. Cuban President Fidel Castro also lobbied hard for support from Latin American countries, and after the vote he fired a series of volleys at several countries that supported the resolution, calling them lackeys of the US.

The resolution expressed the commission's concern "at the continued violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba, such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly and the rights associated with the administration of justice, despite the expectations raised by some positive steps taken by the government of Cuba in the past few years." The resolution noted Cuba had taken steps to "enhance freedom of religion." It called for Cuba "to ensure respect for human rights," "to guarantee the rule of law through democratic institutions and the independence of the judicial system," and it expressed concern about repression of political dissidents.

The vote was 22 in favor, 20 opposed, and 10 abstentions. In favor were: Argentina, Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Guatemala, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Madagascar, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom, US, and Uruguay.

Voting against were: Algeria, Burundi, China, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Liberia, Libya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Swaziland, Syria, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zambia. Abstaining were: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Kenya, Mauritius, Mexico, Niger, Peru, Senegal, and Thailand.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was absent.

Earlier in the session, the commission voted 23-17 for a Chinese no-action resolution that prevented a vote to condemn China. While the US has failed for 10 years to get a condemnation of China, it has succeeded every year but one since 1992 in getting a condemnation of Cuba (see EcoCentral, 1998-04-30).

Cuba accused some Latin American governments of caving in to US pressure, and Washington made no secret that it had pressured governments to vote against Cuba. A US official told The Miami Herald, "There was a real pressure strategy, from the president to the embassies, in talking with other countries." Likewise, Havana mounted a major diplomatic and public-relations effort to win votes. However, the campaign turned sour in February when Castro started a personal fight

with Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa, suggesting that his government was "licking the boots of the Yanquis" because of its ties to the US.

An article in Cuba's official government newspaper Granma said Argentina was willing to trade its vote against Cuba for US aid. Argentina then recalled its ambassador from Havana. Czechs split over embargo question The Czech Republic sponsored the resolution as it had for the two previous years. Poland, which co-sponsored the resolution in 1999 and 2000, dropped out this year. Cuba reacted strongly to the 2000 sponsors, especially to the Czech government (see NotiCen, 2000-05-10).

Relations between the two countries were further strained with the arrest of two Czech nationals in January on charges of acting as agents of the US in their meetings with Cuban dissidents (see NotiCen, 2001-02-22). The final version of this year's resolution contained a clause that said, "The international community should help the Cuban people strengthen their rights and well-being, and should adopt measures that would benefit Cubans economically."

Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kavan said the paragraph could be read as a criticism of the US embargo against Cuba. The original draft prepared by the Czech Foreign Ministry specifically condemned the embargo, but after a telephoned complaint by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Czech President Vaclav Havel had the reference to the embargo made invisible.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the US objective was to explicitly condemn Cuba while leaving out of the resolution "other factors such as economic issues." During one of the regular televised round-table discussions of current affairs, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said the US had pressured seven countries, including four in Africa, to reverse their votes from the previous year and support the resolution. He said the US told Cameroon there would be no human rights resolution against it if it supported the Czech resolution.

Perez Roque said the Cuban government had a fax from the Congolese minister of human rights saying the delegation from the Democratic Republic of the Congo would oppose the resolution. But the US pressured the Congolese delegation to leave the hall during the Cuba vote. Congo had voted against the 2000 resolutions on Cuba and China.

Citing a report on the session, Perez Roque said the Congolese delegation went into hiding on another floor of the Palais des Nations where the session was held, and at one point fled in a car to avoid attending the session. "There was a point when the Chinese managed to convince them, and the Congolese took their seats, but as soon as the Chinese went back to their seats, two Yankees came and took the Congolese away again, the whole delegation ran out again. That was the degree of running around that went on. There is not enough time to fully analyze this here," said Perez Roque. "And when the moment arrived when the United States wanted to condemn Iraq, the representatives from the Democratic Republic of the Congo took their seats, voted against Iraq, and then got up and left again."

Federico Andreu, director general of the Comision Internacional de Juristas, told the Mexican news magazine Proceso that the US lobbying was heavy and included sending emissaries to key countries soliciting votes in Geneva. He said US "manipulation" was evident to those who voted

against the Cuba resolutions. Cuba is singled out for condemnation, he said, "while the international community ignores other countries with worse human rights records."

The removal of language condemning the US embargo prevented some who voted in favor of the resolution from simultaneously condemning Cuba and expressing their opposition to the embargo. A resolution from the Mexican Congress strongly criticized US economic sanctions. The Uruguayan Foreign Ministry rebuked Cuba for not improving its human rights record but at the same time said it disapproved of the US "unilateral imposition of economic sanctions against Cuba." During the weeks since the vote, Havana has repeatedly criticized several Western Hemisphere governments, especially Argentina, Canada, and Costa Rica for their votes in favor of the resolution and Mexico for its abstention.

A Foreign Ministry press statement accused Canada of a "growing subordination" to US foreign policy. "We wonder if the policy of Canada toward Cuba today is being formulated in Ottawa or Washington," said the statement. In retaliation for Cuba's charges that the US directed its vote, Costa Rica recalled its consul from Havana and withdrew its credentials from the Cuban consul in San Jose. The Mexican case was more complicated because of its traditional support for Cuba on noninterventionist principles.

Havana believed President Vicente Fox's administration intended to vote against Cuba. Perez Roque said Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Jorge Castaneda "did everything possible to get Cuba condemned in Geneva." The remark started a frank exchange in which Castaneda said he "couldn't care less" about Perez Roque's views. Perez Roque attributed the abstention to popular pressure against supporting the resolution.

The Mexican Congress urged the administration to vote in support of Cuba, but by mid-March Castaneda said Mexico would abstain. Castaneda defended abstention on the grounds that the resolution was "selective" and "politicized." However, said Castaneda, Mexico could not vote against the resolution because his office had concerns about the human rights situation in Cuba. As for Argentina, Castro said its foreign minister was a "bootlicker" of the US, and that the country "no longer has a president." He said

Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo was now in charge. But Argentina's ambassador in Havana, Oscar Torres Avalos, said that his preference would have been to abstain. He said that, while freedom was restricted in Cuba, much of the blame could be traced to the US embargo. The politics of voting at Geneva has also become an issue in Guatemala where the legislature has summoned Foreign Minister Gabriel Orellana and other officials to answer questions about how the country's vote was determined and whether President Alfonso Portillo had been pressured by the US as Cuba charged.

Deputy Nineth Montenegro of the Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN) said, "It's important to find out why President Portillo decided at the last minute to change his initial position, which was to abstain." Cuban dissidents propose alternative to yearly Geneva exercise The outcome of the vote on Cuba depends on the political alignments of the 53-nation commission, which changes some of its membership each year.

To remedy the situation, a Cuban dissident group, Mesa de Reflexion de la Oposicion Moderada (MROM), has proposed creation of an independent forum outside the UN. MROM director Manuel Cuesta Morua said that the Cuba-US confrontation had "blurred" the picture of human rights in Cuba and that resolutions did not help improve human rights there. The governments represented on the panel take positions according to their political affiliations with one side or the other, he said.

Saenz and Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Comision Cubana por Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional (CCDHRN), told Proceso that the yearly resolutions placed dissidents in the middle of the Cuba-US confrontation. "All this makes our work difficult," said Sanchez. "On one side, we have to face the violations that the Cuban government commits, and on the other, we have to counteract and distance ourselves from the erroneous policy of the United States."

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