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U.N. Chides Cuba on Human Rights

by LADB Staff

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Departing from its customary resolutions condemning Cuba for human rights violations, the UN Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution April 19 that recognized Cuba's progress in social fields but asked the government to consider improvements in human rights. Although the resolution was more moderate than in previous years, Cuba reacted with heated attacks on Mexico, Uruguay, and other Latin American neighbors who supported it.

Since the US began pressing for condemnations of Cuba at the annual meetings of the commission in Geneva, the vote has ranged from 21-20 against Cuba (1999) to 19-16 against the resolution (1998). Combining "no" votes and abstentions, a majority, running as high as 37 of the 53 commission member- states (1998), has usually not voted to condemn Cuba.

Nevertheless, the struggle over votes and the ensuing exchange of insults has come to be more important than the vote itself. For three years running, the Czech Republic sponsored the resolution on Cuba, last year with unpleasant results as Cuba launched a ferocious attack on the Czech government and some Latin American states notably Argentina and Costa Rica that voted for the resolution (see NotiCen, 2001-05-03).

This year, the Czech Foreign Ministry made it clear that it would not again sponsor the anti-Cuban resolution. Instead, Czech diplomats traveled to Chile, Peru, and Mexico looking for one of Cuba's neighbors to take the lead at Geneva.

Cuban officials said Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda showed a draft resolution he considered positive to Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. The subject of Geneva came up during conversations between President Fidel Castro and Mexican President Vicente Fox during the latter's visit to Havana in February.

According to Castro's account, he criticized US maneuvers to line up support for the 2002 resolution so strongly that Fox decided Mexico would not sponsor even the "positive" resolution. Turning to Peru, President George W. Bush discussed the subject during his March visit there with Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo.

Prime Minister Roberto Danino said Toledo told Bush that Peru was the leader in the region's efforts to resolve the issue of human rights violations. US Ambassador in Lima John Hamilton said Peru was in the position to take a leading role in Geneva on the Cuba issue. While Danino said Bush did not go so far as to ask Toledo to sponsor the resolution, he stressed how important the Cuba matter was to the US. But Toledo backed out after Congress voted overwhelmingly against casting Peru's vote for the resolution. In early March, the Cuba World Data Service (WDS) reported that the Cuban Foreign Ministry had received a draft resolution purporting to have come from Peru. The draft,

written in English, accused Cuba of human rights violations and was a much harsher version than the one finally approved in Geneva.

Foreign Minister Perez Roque said the draft was fraudulent and had been prepared in Washington. He said Peruvian authorities confirmed that the draft had not originated in Peru. "The State Department is looking for a father for its offspring," Perez Roque said. That left Uruguay, which introduced its resolution just one hour before the deadline.

The Uruguayan newspaper La Republica reported that President Jorge Batlle promised to introduce the motion during a recent trip to Washington. US officials approved the resolution despite its lack of explicit condemnation but excised a reference to the US embargo, substituting the phrase "adverse international environment," said the newspaper. Batlle denied the newspaper's allegation that Bush had imposed the draft on him. Batlle said it was he, not Bush, who brought up the subject.

The Uruguay draft sidestepped outright condemnation on the human rights question. It "invited" the Cuban government "to make efforts to achieve progress in respect of human, civil, and political rights, and requested the High Commissioner for Human Rights to send a personal representative with a view to cooperation between her office and the government of Cuba in implementation of the present resolution." T

he resolution included a paragraph acknowledging Cuba's accomplishments in the area of social rights "despite an adverse international environment." The resolution passed by a vote of 23 to 21 with nine abstentions. Latin American countries voting in favor were: Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. Among the Latin Americans, only Venezuela joined Cuba in voting against the resolution. Brazil and Ecuador abstained.

In other business, the commission decided not to ask the Russian Federation to investigate human rights violations in Chechnya, and there was no resolution regarding human rights in China. The Latin American countries voting for the resolution saw it as an improvement because the Cold War concepts underlying previous resolutions were not in it. Jorge Voto-Bernales of Peru said it was "a consistent and friendly appeal" to Cuba. "It was a Latin American initiative," he said, "reflecting the democratic visions of the continent."

Resolution open to various interpretations

The text of the resolution is open to various interpretations. One could say it was a defeat for the US because it did not explicitly condemn Cuba. The official Cuban newspaper Granma saw the vote as a moral victory for Cuba because of the "ridiculous margin of two votes." The resolution could also be interpreted as a defeat for Cuba because so many Latin American states voted for it and because any negative resolution on human rights in Cuba, no matter how mild, is considered a rebuke because the US says it is.

Cuba calls supporters of resolution "bootlickers"

The Cuban reaction, expressed through Granma, said Latin American supporters of the resolution had given in to intense economic and other pressures from the US. Granma called those governments "bootlickers" and "Judases." During debate on the resolution, Cuban representative Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios said there had been hope no resolution would be introduced against Cuba this year because the US did not have a seat on the commission. "This was naive," he said. "The United States needed this resolution to justify its genocidal policy of economic blockade against Cuba, and had secretly and conspiratorially drafted other countries, who had surrendered to the superpower, to introduce the resolution," said Fernandez. "None of the sponsors of [the resolution]...had ethical credentials or moral authority to judge or evaluate human rights in Cuba."

Votes cause problems in several countries

The Latin American governments that voted for the resolution experienced some degree of dissent over the issue at home. The most serious dissent occurred in Mexico, which, for the first time, voted against Cuba. A Mexican official said the clause recommending that Cuba accept a UN human rights rapporteur persuaded Fox to support the resolution. The ministry said the wording was not interventionist. The president's office said Mexico supported it because human rights "are absolute and universal values." The vote is "in favor of a cause and not against a country," said the statement. Fox acted in the face of substantial opposition from the Mexican Congress, which asked him to abstain. When he refused, a group of opposition legislators went to Havana to tell Castro the Geneva vote was not of their doing.

Prominent lawmakers called for Castaneda's resignation (see SourceMex, 04/24/02). In the midst of the controversy, Fox's ambassador in Cuba Ricardo Pascoe, said he had been summoned to San Jose during the Rio Group conference in April and there recommended that Castaneda instruct the Mexican delegation to abstain in Geneva. Jose Luis Soberanes Fernandez, president of Mexico's Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), also disapproved of the vote. He said the Fox administration should stop worrying about human rights in Cuba and worry instead about human rights violations against Mexicans in Mexico and in the US. Soberanes made the remarks while attending a conference on the use of torture in Mexico.

Independent Deputy Jaime Martinez called the vote "a flagrant violation" of the nonintervention concept in the Mexican Constitution. He promised to introduce a motion in Congress to impeach Castaneda. In Cuba, Randy Alonso, moderator of the television discussion program Mesa Redonda, said Fox's decision made Mexico "a last-minute Judas." Panelists on the program remembered that Fox, during his February trip to Cuba, had promised not to support a resolution against Cuba.

During the same trip, Castaneda announced that Mexico would not sponsor any resolution condemning Cuba and would abstain as it did last year if the resolution were condemnatory. Mexico would not act as "intermediary, messenger, communicator, or facilitator between Cuba and the United States," said Castaneda.

Nicaragua sends Miami delegates to Geneva

Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos has also been severely criticized at home, but for the makeup of his delegation. He announced in mid-March that he would not appoint anyone to the delegation who was recommended by the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). Throughout his term, former President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002), who has close ties to the CANF, included Miami Cuban exile Luis Zuniga in the delegation.

Cuba claims Zuniga has done terrorist work against Cuba for the foundation (see NotiCen, 1997-05-08). But Bolanos reversed himself and sent CANF official Omar Lopez Montenegro and Ana Navarro, daughter of Bolanos' Minister for Agriculture and Forestry Augusto Navarro. She has been active in anti-Castro affairs in Washington and Miami, and, during the Elian Gonzalez saga, represented CANF in lobbying efforts to keep the boy in the US (see NotiCen, 1999-12-23). The Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) demanded that Bolanos change his position.

In a notice in a local newspaper, the party expressed its "concern and deep displeasure over the government's decision to attach itself to United States policies." While the outcome of the vote may be meaningless in terms of actually protecting human rights, it has the effect of forcing Cuba's neighbors and important trade and political allies to take sides. Canada and all of the European Union (EU) states on the commission voted against Cuba this year.

In 2001, the votes against Cuba cast by Argentina and Costa Rica, and Mexico's abstention, caused a rift with Cuba at the rhetorical level. This year, Uruguay broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. Movement toward reforming commission A trend toward reform of the UN's system of evaluating human rights, barely noticeable in past years, appears to have gained some momentum. The Castro government has long maintained that the US uses the commission to discredit the Cuban regime and justify continuation of the embargo. But Cuba has been willing to engage the US on this issue, and both start the competition for votes months before the April meeting.

Following the vote, Foreign Minister Perez Roque said the commission ought to be restructured because "the double standard and the interests of the powerful" had invaded its deliberations. Costa Rica has taken the lead to do something about what Foreign Minister Roberto Rojas calls the commission's "excessive politicization." In an interview with Inter Press Service, Rojas said the annual sessions have concentrated on censuring countries instead of fulfilling their principal mission to defend human rights. "We believe there should be clear rules so that all countries are evaluated." He thought the resolution on Cuba would help set a precedent for countries opening their borders to observation by the commission. Rojas introduced a set of reform proposals at the Rio Group meeting in Costa Rica last month.

A Costa Rican Foreign Ministry source asked, "Why censure Cuba and not China? Why is priority given to a country that is powerful?" Celia Medrano, general coordinator of the independent Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA) based in San Jose, Costa Rica, told Inter Press Service that her organization was concerned about the power the US has in UN agencies. "It is worth noting that Cuba receives condemnation, but when the United States invaded Panama [in 1989], there was no move to censure." "We cannot say there are no human rights violations in Cuba, but neither are we going to tolerate the double standard of the United States," Medrano said.

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