

Commission on Human Rights

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Statement  
of the Head of the Delegation of the Czech Republic

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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

It is my honour and pleasure to present, on behalf of the co-authors and co-sponsors the draft resolution on the "Situation of Human Rights in Cuba".

Our decision to repeat the motion we presented here last year has been the result of careful consideration. It is based on our principles and values, as well as on our knowledge of the facts concerning the situation of human rights in Cuba. Far from seeking confrontation or the politization of the human rights debate, we want to contribute to a real and unconstrained dialogue on the situation of human rights in our countries. We want to recognize our possible differences in peace and to use them, if possible, for good, making them the subject of an open dialogue and transforming them into an instrument of cooperation.

After all, the gap between the existing political reality in Cuba and the very nature of the human rights debate in the contemporary world is well demonstrated by the reactions voiced earlier during this session by the distinguished members of the Cuban delegation. Our main motive is our commitment to an open dialogue among the members of the international community and the will to promote all meaningful forms of international cooperation. Nonetheless, it is generally recognized that the human rights record of the Cuban authorities has not improved during the last year.

*"Numerous civilians, especially civil groups like independent journalists, human rights advocates, those who demand amnesty for political prisoners ... and many more have been victims of systematic aggression by the authorities. ... Practices like intimidation and harassment and short term arrests as well as long term sentences have not diminished during 1999 .... The well known physician Oscar Biscet of the Lawton Human Rights Foundation, which promotes particularly the right to life (opposing death penalty and forced abortion) was detained 26 times in 18 months; expelled from the Cuban National Health System (Feb. 98) and evicted from his home, depending on charity of friends. He has been mistreated physically and psychologically numerous times, suffering beatings, threats, blackmail and arbitrary incarceration in cells. ... On February 25 Doctor Biscet was sentenced to three years. Many other peaceful activists share the fate of Dr. Biscet and have to endure inhumane prison conditions." (Pax Christi, Netherlands)*

These are the patterns of systematic and enduring violation of human rights in the country concerned.

Our initiative is based on the recognition of, and respect for, the elementary standards of the international human rights instruments, which have to be valid for all members of the international community and which underlie all activities of this Commission. The principle we want to defend is simple: since we believe that human rights are indivisible and of a universal nature, we must be ready to defend them not only when our own fate and well-being are at stake, but also when others are being deprived of them, - in whatever part of the world.

Our initiative is not only a step taken on the governmental level. It stems from the spirit of civil society. It reflects the attitudes both of the Cuban dissidents inside the country and of the numerous non-governmental organizations concerned by the situation in Cuba, namely Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Pax Christi, Amnesty International and a long list of others. These

NGOs have been drawing attention to the unacceptable situation of human rights in Cuba for a long time and they are in full agreement with the present resolution, asking explicitly the members of this Commission for their support.

Firmly convinced that the text of the resolution I have the honor to present here today, is fair and balanced, let me now make a few points on behalf of the Czech Republic, which has come, together with Poland, to launch this initiative. Our position, as far as the link between the dialogue about international human rights and the debate concerning adequate forms of international economic cooperation, has been repeatedly stated. We are against unilateral economic sanctions and unilateral coercive measures leading to isolation. We believe that there is a positive linkage between political pluralism and economic prosperity. We understand and lend our support to the interest of many countries to contribute to a sustainable recovery of Cuba. We welcome the willingness of many states to engage Cuba in an open dialogue and to bring it out of its isolation, as well as the steps to encourage the international community to make efforts to alleviate the economic suffering of the Cuban people.

We accept the text presented here as a meaningful compromise within the community of democratic nations. Nevertheless, as far as the future activities of the Czech Republic in the field of international human rights, - and within this Commission, - are concerned, our aim is to steer the dialogue more into this direction.

To conclude, let me mention the Open letter sent to the Cuban dissidents by fellow human rights defenders from East-Central Europe, in November 1999, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of democratic revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. It was signed by almost 50 former activists from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Slovakia. The letter stated, among others:

*"The results of the past decade show that the path from a closed to an open society can be arduous. In spite of all the difficulties which have accompanied the transformation of our society, however, we have been constantly aware of the enormous gift that is freedom. We still keep in mind those fantastic moments, when we realized that communist dictatorships have truly come to an end and that we have lived to see something many of us did not dare to hope for: the events in which we were taking part were not a sort of deviation from relentless historical necessity, but a genuine revolution, fundamentally transforming our lives and bringing us a true liberation .... If our transformation experiences and the lessons we learned can serve as an inspiration - or as good or bad examples - for Cuba, when the time comes, we are ready to help you, in a spirit of solidarity."*

Mr. Chairman, this passage expresses, in a nutshell, our position. I would like to point out that practically all countries of Central and Eastern Europe, having lived through the same experiences of totalitarianism, are among the cosponsors of this resolution. I invite all the members of the Commission to support it, as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.