

## STATEMENT OF MIRIAM LEIVA

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Senators,

Dear Rosa Maria Paya, whose inspiring father was my friend,

Dear members of the peaceful Cuban opposition and dissidence within the island-nation and abroad,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for granting me the opportunity of bringing my voice from Cuba to this important hearing.

I have been a dissident for over 22 years. I have been subjected to surveillance, interrogations, harassment, and searches of my home. Like my late husband, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, I lost my job and right to a pension.

In 2003, Oscar was imprisoned with 74 other peaceful Cubans, and was sentenced to 20 years. Our only crimes have been speaking out, writing and seeking the wellbeing of the Cuban people. For us, that means the quest for equal opportunities without discrimination and regardless of political opinions, economic prosperity and a good quality of life. In short, freedom and democracy, and respect for all human rights.

As you well know, we have lived under a totalitarian regime since 1959 that brought suffering and exile.

In the United States 2 million Cubans found that by working hard they could have the opportunity to enjoy the life they were denied in their own country. In return, they have contributed to this society, and today, in this room, we can address one of many prestigious Cuban-American lawmakers.

Meanwhile, 77% of Cuba's population was born after 1959. The utopia turned into a nightmare. For 56 years, the government had been hammering Cuban's minds, sending them to trenches through the island nation and abroad, depriving them of food, clothes, money, entertainment and Internet, and closely watching and repressing. Because the regime found in the United States the suitable culprit for all its failures, wrongdoings and repression, it alleged the perils and shortages were due to American imperialism and the embargo.

Despite all of this, change has taken place in the minds of the people, and not only due to impoverishment, disbelief in the government's unfulfilled promises, and hopelessness. Since the Obama Administration started its proactive people to people policy in 2009, beginning with Cuban Americans, a lot has changed.

Remittances from relatives and friends help thousands of Cubans to survive and even open small businesses.

More important, Cubans are increasingly empowered as they exchange views with Cuban-Americans coming to visit and with other Americans on cultural, academic, scientific, religious, sport and trade activities. The impact on Cubans from all walks of life traveling to the United States is overwhelming; here, they discover the opportunities offered by democracy and work.

It is still hard to describe the amazement we felt on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014. On that date, Cubans watched the so-called “enemy” announcing the new measures, and read President Obama’s speech published next to Raul Castro’s in the newspapers. Now, anywhere one goes there is one main issue in conversations and hopeful expectations broadly shared.

Yet, there is more to be done. Americans are the best assets in people to people diplomacy, but we cannot fully benefit from an exchange of ideas, values and expertise with them. How could anyone understand that you can visit North Korea but not Cuba? The ability of Americans to interact with Cubans is impeded by restrictions to travel to our country, and these must end.

Raúl Castro is stepping down in 3 years, and currently is paving the way for the new leaders. This period is crucial for the transition and the future of Cuba, both for the civil society and foreign partners.

Mainly, it is Brazil, Russia and China who are already positioned in Cuba. Yet, Americans and Cuban-Americans are still prevented by their government from participating in economic and commercial relations with Cuba, and from contributing their knowhow and technology to the startups in self-employment that offer independence from the state owned economy.

President Obama has expressed his unwavering commitment to democracy, human rights, and civil society; the continuation of US programs aimed at promoting positive change in Cuba; and the encouragement of reforms in high-level engagement with Cuban officials.

While many dissidents and opponents support the new approach of the American Administration in the relations with the Cuban government, others do not. Nevertheless, the objective is the same: defense of human rights, democratic values, and friendship and assistance to the Cuban people. Likewise in the opposition and dissidence, we all seek the wellbeing and progress of the Cuban people and our country.

The path to liberty, respect of human rights and democracy is arduous, and we must always keep in mind that we must not depart from those goals.

We must also keep on leaving aside personal interests, while we devise programs that reflect the needs and aspirations of Cubans to whom we aspire to reach out.

We welcome advice and support from our friends as we explain to them how Cuba is now and what can serve it better. I believe that is the reason we are gathered here now. The American policy towards the Cuban government has disserved it for 56 years, so it must be changed. The embargo must be lifted for the benefit of our peoples and nations.

You can only get to know what is going on within the island-nation, assist civil society, bring your values, knowledge, and expertise, and offer your commercial and economic entrepreneurs by being there.

Reestablishing relations will grant a better environment for the American diplomats in Cuba, their contacts with the Cuban population and the civil society, and their ability to access a direct channel to the national officials, among other issues. Normalizing the 56 years long estrangement will take a long time. But there is now a unique opportunity to assist the Cuban people and it must not be wasted.

Thank you.