

# Cuba and US exchange limited concessions

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In a series of actions over the past month, in the wake of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raid in Miami which rescued Elian Gonzalez and restored him to the custody of his Cuban father, the Cuban government and the US government have exchanged modest economic and political concessions.

Cuban authorities have released three of the four best-known political dissidents imprisoned on the island, beginning with Felix Bonne Carcasses, 60, an engineering professor, on May 12. Economist Marta Beatriz Roque, 55, was released May 15, and Rene Gomez Manzano, a lawyer, on May 23.

All three had been jailed for nearly three years for issuing a public attack on the Cuban Communist Party's monopoly on power, in a document entitled, "The Motherland Belongs to All." They received "conditional release," the equivalent of early release for good behavior, after several one and two-day furloughs in anticipation of discharge.

The fourth signer of the opposition document, Vladimiro Roca, a former air force pilot and the son of the late CCP leader Blas Roca, received a five-year prison term and remains held in solitary confinement in a prison in Arisa, 125 miles east of Havana. The four, who called themselves the Internal Dissidence Working Group, were arrested in July 1997 and convicted of incitement to sedition in a one-day closed trial on March 21, 1999.

The Cuban government also relaxed controls over long distance telephone calls from the island to the United States, with the state-owned telephone company offering expanded direct-dial service that will, for the first time, allow most Cubans to call relatives and friends in the United States without going through an operator.

Up until now, direct-dial calls abroad were only possible on cellular phones and lines reserved for diplomats, businessmen and journalists, all purchased

with US dollars. The Cuban phone system is extremely antiquated, because the US economic blockade has prevented any upgrading of equipment since the 1959 revolution. Recently the Cuban phone company set up a joint venture with the Italian phone company which will install digital call-switching centers throughout the island.

While the action amounts to a relaxation of police-state controls over phone conversations, it seems motivated as much by the desire to raise state revenues, since direct-dial calls will carry a steep charge, \$2.30 a minute to the US and up to \$5 a minute to Latin America and Europe. The rate to the US is two or three times as high as the rate charged to US residents telephoning Cuba.

These actions came on the heels of several votes by a key panel of the US House of Representatives in favor of loosening the reactionary US trade embargo against Cuba. The House Appropriations Committee approved amendments to an appropriations bill that would permit sales of US food and medical supplies to Cuba under certain conditions, including a ban against any federal subsidies for the purchases, and a requirement that US companies doing business on the island obtain new licenses each year. Another amendment bars the White House from unilaterally imposing new embargoes on food or medicine sales to any country, including Cuba, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Sudan and Libya, without congressional approval.

The key vote came on May 10 when the committee, by a surprisingly large margin of 35-24, rejected an effort by Majority Whip Tom DeLay to remove the amendment on Cuba trade from the bill. DeLay had successfully blocked a similar proposal last year, after the Senate voted by 70-30 for loosening the embargo.

The measure still must pass the full House and be reenacted by the Senate, and it would not lead to any immediate surge in US exports to Cuba, which has

current contracts to import food and medicine from Canada and Europe. But the vote was significant politically, as most farm-state Republicans broke with DeLay and the House leadership to support loosening the embargo.

Representative George R. Nethercutt, a Republican congressman from eastern Washington state who led the effort to loosen the embargo, said as much as \$7 billion in overseas sales of agricultural products was being lost because of the sanctions against Cuba and other former purchasers of US exports.

Democratic Rep. Charles Stenholm of Texas, the ranking minority member of the Agriculture Committee and a well-known House right-winger, led a delegation of Texas agribusinessmen to Cuba in April. Restrictions on agricultural sales don't affect the Castro government, he said. "We're hurting the Cuban people and American producers." Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.), who lobbied her colleagues to overturn the embargo, said, "I cannot look my farmers in the eye and say I haven't done everything possible to help you. We're facing now the third year of terrible commodity prices."

The American Farm Bureau Federation, which backed the relaxation, said that the Cuban market could be worth up to \$1 billion a year, and that US exporters would have a clear price advantage over Canadian and European competitors because of lower transport costs.

The Clinton administration opposes the legislation as an intrusion on the power of the executive to carry out foreign policy. "Sanctions legislation should give the president the flexibility he needs to conduct foreign policy and protect national security," a White House spokesman said.



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