

Near-unanimous vote at UN to repudiate US blockade of Cuba

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1 November 2007

The United Nations General Assembly Tuesday voted by a near-unanimous majority to condemn the 47-year-old US economic blockade against Cuba. The vote, coming less than a week after President Bush delivered a bellicose speech suggesting violent regime change in the Caribbean island nation, represented a stinging rebuke of Washington's policy.

This is the 16th time that the UN has voted on such a nonbinding resolution. Undoubtedly, as on previous occasions, Washington will ignore the demand of the international body. Nonetheless, the vote is symptomatic of the extreme political isolation that American aggression—not only against Cuba, but also in Iraq and Afghanistan and increasingly threatened against Iran—has produced for the US administration.

The 184-to-4 tally represented a record margin for the anti-embargo measure. The only countries voting with the US delegation at the UN and against the resolution were Israel—whose position represents reciprocity for the nearly unbroken record of US votes against resolutions condemning Israeli aggression against the Palestinians as well as in Lebanon and elsewhere—and two US South Pacific protectorates, Palau and the Marshall Islands, with a combined population of about 80,000.

Micronesia, another former US protectorate, abstained, while Albania, El Salvador and Iraq did not cast any votes.

In his address to the General Assembly in support of the measure, entitled "Necessity of Ending the Economic, Commercial and Financial Embargo Imposed by the United States of America against Cuba," Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque referred indirectly to Bush's October 24 speech at the US State Department, citing "the threats of recent days."

Pérez Roque estimated that the US embargo has cost the Cuban national economy at least \$222 billion over the course of nearly half a century. He said that the economic blockade represented a US attempt "to subdue the Cuban people through starvation and disease."

The Cuban foreign minister cited the origins of the

blockade in 1960 in a White House meeting of President Dwight Eisenhower's National Security Council at which a document from the State Department was presented advocating a new policy towards Cuba. The document read:

"There is no effective political opposition in Cuba...the only predictable measure we have today to alienate internal support for the Revolution is through disillusionment and desperation, based on dissatisfaction and economic duress. Every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba. Money and supplies must be denied to Cuba in order to decrease real wages, bring about hunger, desperation and the overthrow of government."

While this policy has been maintained by 10 successive American administrations, Pérez Roque pointed out that it has been significantly escalated under George W. Bush. He charged the Bush administration with introducing "new measures, bordering on madness and fanaticism." He noted that last year, the US government went so far as to penalize the Alliance of Baptist Churches for engaging in outlawed tourism in Cuba after it sent some of its missionaries to the island.

"Cuban children have been particularly harmed by the blockade that President Bush has promised to strengthen," said the Cuban foreign minister. He pointed out that in response to government threats, the American pharmaceutical company Abbot had cut off supplies of the anesthetic Sevoflurane, which is the best for use in operations on children, forcing Cuban hospitals to use inferior substitutes. Similarly, the US company Saint-Jude, which supplied pacemakers for children suffering from arrhythmia, was compelled to end its exports under pressure from the US Office for Foreign Assets Control, which enforces the blockade.

"The US delegation should explain to this Assembly why the Cuban children suffering from cardiac arrhythmias are enemies of the US government," he said, adding that Bush would probably dismiss them as " 'collateral victims' of his war against Cuba."

While claiming to promote freedom of expression, the US government has also prevented American companies from providing Internet service to Cuba and clamped down on the arts. Pérez Roque pointed out that US hotel chains were ordered by the US government to cancel contracts with Cuban musicians working at their hotels around the world.

Cuban musicians, he said, could presumably be approved for employment “only if they move to Miami, declare that they admire the policies of President Bush and regret having ever lived in Cuba.”

He also noted the retaliation against American filmmakers Oliver Stone and Michael Moore for filming in Cuba, describing the government’s action as “21st century McCarthyism.”

Turning to the tightening of the sanctions by the Bush administration, Pérez Roque noted that an American going to the island as a tourist or a Cuban resident in the US wanting to visit a sick relative on the island risked penalties as severe as a quarter-million-dollar fine or up to 10 years in prison.

The Cuban foreign minister stressed that the impact of the US policy was not limited to Cuba, but that Washington’s attempts to enforce the blockade by penalizing third countries engaged in trade and investment there represented a violation of international law and the UN Charter.

He said that over the past year, at least 30 countries have been sanctioned by Washington. Among the examples he cited were the freezing of the assets of the Netherlands Caribbean Bank and the barring of US citizens and companies from doing business with the bank because of its Cuban ties and the fining of the British company PSL Energy Services \$164,000 for exporting oil industry equipment to the island. He also listed several companies that were barred from exporting products to Cuba after being taken over by US-based multinationals or because the products included as little as 10 percent American components.

Finally, he reported that US intelligence agencies had managed to secure confidential information from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications about which banks conducted transactions with Cuba and had “grossly threatened” some 20 banks based in various countries in an attempt to “disrupt any kind of relation or transaction with Cuba.”

Before 1992, Cuba had been unable to get a resolution condemning the US economic blockade passed by the UN General Assembly. That year, however, the US Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act, which sought to carry out the extraterritorial enforcement of Washington’s vendetta against Cuba for its 1959 revolution.

Among the provisions of the act was a ban that denied

entry to US ports to cargo ships from third countries that had visited Cuba within the previous six months. It also barred foreign-based subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba, travel to Cuba by US citizens, and family remittances to Cuba.

The US act coincided with an increasing turn by the Castro government towards opening up Cuba’s economy to foreign capitalist investment, particularly from Europe and Canada. Significantly, all of Washington’s supposed allies in the European Union, Japan and Canada voted for the resolution condemning its policy, as did every Latin American nation, with the sole exception of El Salvador, which abstained.

Having frozen itself out of the Cuban market by virtue of its blockade, the US has attempted to drive its economic rivals out as well. In this sense, its Cuban policy parallels the approach it took toward both Iraq and Iran. As in those cases, the logic of the American policy is one of militarism and aggressive war. That was the significance of Bush’s speech last week, with its affirmation that Washington’s “operative word in our future dealings with Cuba is not ‘stability,’ ” but rather “freedom,” and with his open appeals to the Cuban military not to “defend a disgraced and dying order.”

In an interview with the Associated Press following the UN vote, Pérez Roque commented that the only “freedom” that Cubans could envision coming from the Bush administration “would be similar to the one he has taken to Iraq.”

The Cuban foreign minister warned, “An attempt to bring about a change of regime in Cuba is going to jeopardize not only Cuba’s stability, but also the stability of the United States, because then a conflict would be unleashed very close to their shores.”



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