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President Bush Discusses Cuba

Roosevelt Room

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THE PRESIDENT: Si ntese. Gracias. Bienvenidos a la Casa Blanca. Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here. Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished officials, honored guests.

We gather today to remember a tragic moment in the history of Cuba. Five years ago this month, Cuban authorities rounded up scores of citizens and charged them with offenses against the regime. Those arrested included teachers and librarians and journalists. They committed no crimes. They simply held views their government did not like, and they refused to be silent. In all, 75 people were given long prison terms. In the world of Cuban dissidents, that crackdown five years ago is remembered as the Black Spring.

A few moments ago I met with one of the men arrested in that crackdown, Miguel Sigler Amaya, y su esposa, Josefa. Miguel was arrested in this crackdown because he and his brothers had long opposed the Castro regime. Over many years they had been harassed, and they had been beaten by Cuban authorities. Miguel once had his ribs cracked by one of the regime's mobs. One of the brothers survived an assassination attempt and the entire family had received death threats. During the Black Spring Miguel was charged with disobedience. He was sentenced to 26 months in prison. His brothers, Ariel y Guido, each received sentences of 20 years.



When Miguel went to prison, his wife Josefa found common cause with the wives of other political prisoners. They formed a group and chose as their symbol the color white -- the color of peace. Every Sunday these Ladies in White -- las Damas de Blanco -- attend Catholic mass, and then together they walk in silence through the streets. In Cuba even that simple act is considered dangerous defiance. The women have been subjected to harassment and beatings. Josefa herself was stopped by an assailant who told her that he was sending her a message, and then he clubbed her with a blunt object on the back of her head.

Josefa was ordered to leave Cuba with Miguel once he was released from prison in 2006. In Cuba, they're considered outlaws. In America, they are heralds of freedom, and I'm proud to stand with them in the White House.

Miguel and Josefa tell a compelling story about brutal repression right off the shores of the United States. And I want to thank you for letting us share your stories, and I thank you for your courage. (Applause.)

I've asked Josefa to please tell the Ladies in White -- las Damas de Blanco -- that as they pray for a free Cuba, the American people -- many American people will pray for them. And we can be confident that a loving God will listen.

For Miguel and Josefa, the horrors of life in Cuba are behind them, but millions of others are still trapped in the tropical gulag. Miguel's brothers still suffer under inhumane conditions in Cuban jails. The Ladies in White still bravely march for freedom. And most of the Cubans imprisoned during the Black Spring are still in jail, subjected to beatings, inadequate medical care, and long separations from their family.

These prisoners of conscience live in daily torment. And so do hundreds of others. Yet most of the world says

nothing. This is a sad and curious pattern. Last fall, dozens of young Cubans who wore bracelets imprinted with one word, "cambio," or change, were arrested by Cuban police because of their political beliefs. Yet in the face of this assault on the freedom of expression, much of the world was silent.

Last December, Cuban authorities stormed into a Catholic church, tear-gassed parishioners, and dragged 18 worshipers out. A Catholic official called the episode, "the worst attack against a church in 45 years." And yet in the face of this assault on religious freedom, much of the world was silent.

And last weekend, Cubans were pushed and shoved and beaten as they distributed copies of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. That same week, Cuba signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The international community applauded Cuba for signing a piece of paper -- but on the abuses that same week, much of the world was silent.

In the face of these abuses, the United States has not been silent, nor will we be silent. (Applause.) We have been consistently joined in condemning the Cuban regime's brutal outrages by a small band of brave nations; countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia have placed themselves at the forefront for the fight for human freedom in Cuba. (Applause.) They recently lived through communist tyranny. They remember what life is like under the boot of the oppressor. They know the daily hardships that ordinary citizens have to endure just to survive. And they refuse to look away.

Unfortunately, the list of countries supporting the Cuban people is far too short -- and the democracies absent from that list are far too notable. When a new day finally dawns for Cubans, they will remember the few brave nations that stood with them, and the many that did not.

A few weeks ago reports of the supposed retirement of Cuba's dictator initially led many to believe that the time had finally come for the United States to change our policy on Cuba and improve our relations with the regime. That sentiment is exactly backward. To improve relations, what needs to change is not the United States; what needs to change is Cuba. Cuba's government must begin a process as peaceful democratic change. They must release all political prisoners. They must have respect for human rights in word and deed, and pave the way for free and fair elections.

So far, all Cuba has done is replace one dictator with another. And its former ruler is still influencing events from behind the scenes. This is the same system, the same faces, and the same policies that led Cuba to its miseries in the first place. The United States is isolating the Cuban regime, and we're reaching out to the Cuban people. We've granted asylum to hundreds of thousands who have fled the regime. We've encouraged private citizens and charities to deliver food and medicine and other assistance directly to the people of Cuba. As a result, the American people are the largest providers of humanitarian aid to the Cuban people in the entire world.

This assistance is easing burdens for many Cuban families. But the sad fact is that life will not improve for the Cuban people until their system of government changes. It will not improve by exchanging one dictator for another. It will not improve if we prop up the same tyranny for the false promise of so-called stability.

As I told the Cuban people last October, a new day for Cuba will come. And we will know when it's here. We will know it's here when jailers go to the cells where Cuban prisoners of conscience are held and set them free. We will know it is here when Miguel Sigler Amaya is reunited with his brothers, and they can say what they think, and can come and go as they please. And we will know it is here when the Ladies in White no longer make their silent vigils, or live in constant fear of assault or arrest.

Until that day comes, the United States will continue to shine a bright and revealing light on Cuba's abuses. We will continue to tell the stories of Cuba's people, even when a lot of the world doesn't want to hear them. And we will carry this refrain in our hearts: Viva Cuba Libre. (Applause.)

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