



International Policy **BRIEF**

News and analysis from the staff of the Center for International Policy

Carter's Press Conference in Havana
By Wayne S. Smith
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Reporting in *The Nation* on March 30, Peter Kornbluh described President Carter's press conference in Havana that day as "remarkable" and as having sent a "powerful, resounding, call for major changes in US policy toward Cuba." Carter called not only for ending all restrictions on the travel of American citizens to Cuba, but for an end to the trade embargo. These restrictions on commerce, he said, were "damaging to the well-being of every citizen in Cuba," and "impeded rather than assisted" reforms that he hoped would be made under Raul Castro's leadership.

He also said Cuba should be removed immediately from the State Department's list of nations that support terrorism. Cuba's inclusion on the list, he said, was "completely unfounded" and based on "untrue allegations" that it is harboring international terrorists from the FARC in Colombia and the Basque ETA from Spain, supposedly against the will of their governments. Carter said he had met with diplomats from both Spain and Colombia while in Cuba and they had both said they welcomed Cuba's policy of allowing FARC and ETA members to be in Cuba.

Carter then told the press that U.S. and Cuban intelligence were now actually "cooperating" in counterterrorism efforts against Al Qaeda. Hardly grounds for keeping Cuba on the list of terrorist states!

Carter also called for the U.S. to release the Cuban Five. These are five members of the Cuban intelligence service who were arrested in 1998, allegedly for spying against the U.S. – and one for conspiracy to commit murder. They were indeed in the U.S. when arrested, but not to spy on the U.S. government or any of its entities; rather, they had been sent up to penetrate certain Cuban exile organizations and to come up with evidence of their terrorist activities against Cuba. The idea, then, was to turn that information over

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to the FBI so that it could take action to halt those activities. Three representatives of the FBI were indeed invited to Cuba in 1998 to receive what the Cuban agents had come up with. The FBI representatives returned with six-th-four folders of pertinent information. The Cubans expected that the U.S. would then quickly take action against the exile terrorists. They were to be disappointed. Rather, apparently able to determine the identity of the sources from the information they had been handed, the FBI arrested the Cuban Five, who in 2001 were put on trial in Miami. Despite the biased atmosphere in Miami, the request for a change of venue was denied. And the Prosecution could really present no evidence that the five had been guilty of anything other than being the unregistered agents of a foreign power. So, by and large, the Prosecution fell back to charging the accused with “conspiracy” to commit espionage and other illegal acts—what one does if one has no hard evidence. But evidence or not, all were convicted in 2001 and given long prison sentences.

Worst of all was the case of Gerardo Hernandez, accused of conspiracy to commit murder in connection with the shutdown in February of 1996 of two Brothers to the Rescue planes with a loss of four lives – and then convicted on the basis of no evidence at all and given two consecutive life sentences.

The Five have now been in prison unjustly for some 13 years. Carter was certainly right to urge that they be released. Their continued imprisonment undercuts the credibility of the U.S. system of justice. Kornbluh reported that “in a remarkable gesture,” Carter visited with two mothers and three wives of the Five.

Carter also met with Alan Gross, the U.S. citizen prosecuted and convicted in March for illegally distributing satellite communications gear in Cuba, part of a USAID “democracy-promotion” program. It had been hoped that Gross would be freed and would return to the U.S. with Carter. Carter made it clear, however, that the Cuban government had indicated in advance that that would not be possible. Carter called for his release not on grounds that he had done nothing illegal – as the State Department is want to claim –, but “because he is innocent of any serious threat to the Cuban people.” That certainly is true and it seems likely that he will shortly be released to his family on what Carter described as “humanitarian grounds.”

Carter also met with the famous dissident blogger Yoani Sanchez and with human rights activists Elizardo Sanchez and Osvaldo Paya. All of course want to see Cuba move toward a more democratic system. At the same time, all call for a lifting of the U.S. embargo and travel controls as steps that would help move Cuba in that direction.

During his visit, Carter met with Fidel Castro, whom he described as “an old friend.” He and Mrs. Carter also had dinner with President Raul Castro their last evening in Havana. He walked them back to their hotel in old Havana. He escorted them to the airport the next day and sent with them a message to President Obama calling for normal relations with the U.S.

Reaction to the Carter Trip

One might have expected the Carter trip to bring forth strong calls for a change in U.S. policy toward Cuba, a policy we have suffered with, unproductively, for decades now. His trip certainly provided the background for such a change and pointed up some of the directions in which we should move, such as removing Cuba from the terrorist list, easing travel controls even further, and, yes, even freeing the Cuban Five. We should also be moving to ease the embargo to the extent possible. Removing it will unfortunately take congressional action and with Ileana Ros as chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, that will not be easy.

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