

# Cuban dissidents ask U.S. to lift travel, aid limits

**Four Cuban dissident groups joined in supporting the U.S. 'elimination of a series of existing restrictions on the shipment of aid and travel to Cuba.'**

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Four of Cuba's most prominent dissident groups are calling on the Bush administration to lift at least some restrictions on travel to the island and direct U.S. aid to pro-democracy groups there, saying the restrictions "in no way help" their struggle.

The dissidents' statement was intended to support the Miami organizations that handle some of the U.S. aid but wound up causing a stir, particularly among hard-line exile groups that support the travel restrictions. It also raised a question of whether the administration would still push its plan for an extra \$80 million to aid an opposition that disagrees with its principal policies.

The six-paragraph statement released over the weekend comes in the wake of a Government Accountability Office report that questioned oversight and spending in \$65 million by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for Cuba democracy programs.

The report showed that some agencies in Miami which send goods such as medicine to dissidents also made questionable expenditures on items such as Godiva chocolates or Gameboys for dissidents' kids.

"We deem it very important to achieve a greater efficiency in the use of said [USAID] funds," the statement said. "We believe that one possible way to achieve this would be the elimination of a series of existing restrictions on the shipment of aid and travel to Cuba, which in no way help the struggle for democracy we wage inside our country.

## **'GREATER SPEED'**

"We hope that the errors committed will be corrected and that a greater amount of aid will reach the pro-democracy activists, so we may advance with greater speed toward the economic, political and social freedom of our motherland."

The statement was signed by prominent opposition leaders Martha Beatriz Roque, of the Assembly To Promote Civilian Society, Gisela Delgado Sabi3n, of the Independent Libraries Project, Elizardo S3nchez, who heads the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, and Vladimiro Roca, of the Social Democratic Party of Cuba and spokesman for All United.

Roque's signature was by far the most surprising because of her long-standing support for travel restrictions. Roque is controversial even among Cuban dissidents, particularly for her hard-line stances and close relationship with Cuban-American legislators.

Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, a strong supporter of Bush Cuba policies, noted that Roque has sent several letters to Congress supporting the 2004 regulations that tightened travel and remittances by Cuban-Americans to the island.

"I have questions to ask about this statement," he said. "It's confusing."

Roque acknowledged that the statement was an about-face for her, but said she signed it because overall it supports continuing the USAID assistance. Other dissident groups oppose the help, saying it gives the Cuban government a way to portray them as hired guns.

Sending U.S. government cash directly to dissidents is currently banned. Seventy-five dissidents were jailed three years ago in a roundup of what the Cuban government considered "mercenaries."

"Sometimes you have to take a position, because the other positions are worse," Roque said by phone from Havana. "This is not my position. I signed it, because the people signing it are the closest to my position."

## **WHICH RESTRICTIONS?**

The signers were unclear as to whether they were calling for lifting all the travel restrictions -- which also ban all U.S. tourist trips -- or just the tighter restrictions introduced in 2004 that cut back Cuban-American family reunification visits from once a year to once every three years.

Delgado, whose husband is a political prisoner, said she wants the entire ban on both U.S. tourism and family reunification visits lifted.

"We live in a closed society and we don't think the doors should be closed even more," she said in a phone interview. "What we need is an opening."

Roca agreed: "The travel restrictions have not provided results. They have hurt the opposition more than the government."

Sánchez said he believed that the group's intention was to oppose the 2004 limitations, not the ban on U.S. tourism. He said lifting the 2004 restrictions would help dissidents because more Cuban-American travelers could bring suitcases filled with medicine and food, rather than waste U.S. taxpayer money on expensive shipping.

A recent Miami Herald investigation found agencies spent large parts of their funding on expensive shipping fees.

The opposition groups' statement puzzled even Juan Carlos Acosta, their representative in Miami, whose spending was criticized in the GAO report.

"Originally the idea was to speak the truth of our efforts for many years," Acosta said. ". . . But the way it was put together, any member of the press would read it as they want to lift the embargo and any American should be able to travel to Cuba."

The U.S. Interests Section in Havana said they had no reaction to the statement.

"They don't make the policy," said spokeswoman Demitra Pappas. "That is determined elsewhere, and our policy hasn't changed."