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equipment and manpower into the scene, including Department of Defense help. Today I've signed a major disaster declaration, which will then enable Federal funds to start heading toward the families who have been affected by these fires.

Looking forward to going out to California tomorrow. I will continue to make sure that our efforts are coordinated, that we are responsive to the needs of people. But most importantly, I want the people in southern California to know that Americans all across this land care deeply about them. We're concerned about their safety; we're concerned about their property; and we offer our prayers and hopes that all will turn out fine in the end. In the meantime, they can rest assured that the Federal Government will do everything we can to help put out these fires.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:55 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California.

Remarks at the Department of State

October 24, 2007

Thank you very much. *Gracias. Buenos dias*. I am pleased to be here at the State Department. I appreciate the work that's done here. Every day, the men and women of this Department serve as America's emissaries to the world. Every day, you help our country respond to aggressors and bring peace to troubled lands. Every day, you advance our country's mission in support of basic human rights to the millions who are denied them. Secretary Rice constantly tells me about the good work being done here at the State Department, and on behalf of a grateful nation, I thank you for your hard work, and I'm pleased to be with you.

Few issues have challenged this Department—and our Nation—longer than the situation in Cuba. Nearly half a century has passed since Cuba's regime ordered American diplomats to evacuate our Embassy in Havana. This was the decisive break of our diplomatic relations with the island, a troubling signal for the future of the Cuban people and the dawn of an unhappy era between our two countries. In this building, President John F. Kennedy spoke about the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba's dictatorship. And it was here where he announced the end of the missile crisis that almost plunged the world into nuclear war.

Today another President comes with hope to discuss a new era for the United States and Cuba. The day is coming when the Cuban people will chart their own course for a better life. The day is coming when the Cuban people have the freedom they have awaited for so long.

Madam Secretary, thank you for your introduction. I'm pleased to be with you and Ambassador Negroponte and all who work here. Thanks for the hospitality. I'm pleased to be here with our Secretary of Commerce, Secretary Carlos Gutierrez—born in Cuba. I appreciate other members of my administration who are here.

I particularly want to thank the Members of Congress who have joined us: Senator Mel Martinez, born in Cuba; Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, born in Cuba; Lincoln Diaz-Balart, born in Cuba; *su hermanito*—[*laughter*]—Mario Diaz-Balart. I want to thank Chris Smith for joining us, Congressman from Jersey; Thaddeus McCotter, Michigan; Debbie Wasserman Schultz from Florida, as well as Tim Mahoney from Florida. Appreciate you being here.

I thank the members of the diplomatic corps who have joined us. I appreciate the Ambassadors to the Organization of American States who are with us. I particularly want to thank the Cuban families who have joined me on the stage.

One of the great success stories of the past century is the advance of economic and political freedom across Latin America. In this room are officials representing nations that are embracing the blessings of democratic government and free enterprise. And the United States is proud and active to work with you in your transformations.

One country in our region still isolates its people from the hope that freedom brings and traps them in a system that has failed them. Forty-eight years ago, in the early moments of Cuba's revolution, its leaders offered a prediction. He said—and I quote—

"The worst enemies which the Cuban revolution can face are the revolutionaries themselves." One of history's great tragedies is that he made that dark prophecy come true.

Cuba's rulers promised individual liberty. Instead, they denied their citizens basic rights that the free world takes for granted. In Cuba, it is illegal to change jobs, to change houses, to travel abroad, to read books or magazines without the expressed approval of the state. It is against the law for more than three Cubans to meet without permission. Neighborhood watch programs do not look out for criminals. Instead, they monitor their fellow citizens, keeping track of neighbors' comings and goings, who visits them, and what radio stations they listen to. The sense of community and the simple trust between human beings is gone.

Cuba's rulers promised an era of economic advancement. Instead, they brought generations of economic misery. Many of the cars on the street predate the revolution, and some of—Cubans rely on horse carts for transportation. Housing for many ordinary Cubans is in very poor condition, while the ruling class lives in mansions. Clinics for ordinary Cubans suffer from chronic shortages in medicine and equipment. Many Cubans are forced to turn to the black market to feed their families. There are long lines for basic necessities—reminiscent of the Soviet bread lines of the last century. Meanwhile, the regime offers fully stocked foodstores for foreign tourists, diplomats, and businessmen in communism's version of apartheid.

Cuba's rulers promised freedom of the press. Instead, they closed down private newspapers and radio and television stations. They've jailed and beaten journalists, raided their homes, and seized their paper, ink, and fax machines. One Cuban journalist asked foreigners who visited him for one thing: a pen. Another uses shoe polish as ink—as a typewriter ribbon.

Cuba's rulers promised, quote, "absolute respect for human rights." Instead, they offered Cubans rat-infested prisons and a police state. Hundreds are serving long prison sentences for political offenses such as the crime of "dangerousness"—as defined by the regime. Others have been jailed for the crime of "peaceful sedition," which means whatever Cuban authorities decide it means.

Joining us here are family members of political prisoners in Cuba. I've asked them to come because I want our fellow citizens to see the faces of those who suffer as a result of the human rights abuses on the island some 90 miles from our shore.

One of them is Olga Alonso. Her brother, Ricardo Gonzalez Alonso [Alfonso]*, has been harassed by Cuban authorities since he was 11 years old, because he wrote things that the Cuban authorities did not like. In 2003, Ricardo was arrested for his writings and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The authorities seized illegal contraband they found in his home. These included such things as a laptop computer, notebooks, and a printer. Olga, we're glad you're here, and thank you for coming.

Marlenis Gonzalez and her daughter Melissa are here. They recently arrived from Cuba, but without Melissa's father. Jorge Luis Gonzalez Tanquero dared to defend the human rights of his countrymen. For that, he was arrested for crimes against the state. Now he languishes in poor health inside a Cuban prison. *Bienvenidos*.

Damaris Garcia *y su tia* Mirta Pernet are with us today. Damaris calls the Cuban Government "a killing machine"—those are her words. They've seen relatives imprisoned for supporting liberty. One beloved family member, Omar Pernet Hernandez, was a poor man who sold candy on the streets of Havana. For advocating freedom, he is serving a sentence of 25 years. He's 62 years old; he's emaciated; yet he remains a determined advocate for human rights for the Cuban people. *Bienvenidos*.

Also with us is Yamile Llanes Labrada. Yamile's husband, Jorge [Jose]* Luis Garcia Paneque, was a surgeon and journalist. He was sentenced to 24 years in prison for daring speak the truth about the regime. Yamile herself was accused of espionage, and she feared for the safety of her four children. After Jose's arrest, a mob organized by state authorities surrounded their house. The mob carried sticks and threatened to set fire to the house with the family inside. Earlier this

* White House correction.

year, Yamile and her children made it off the island. They do not know when they'll see their father again. *Bienvenidos*, Yamile.

I want to thank each of you coming today. I thank you for allowing me to share your stories, and I thank you for your courage. I ask that God watch over you and your loved ones. *Que Dios les bendiga a ustedes y a su familias*. And I join your prayers for a day when the light of liberty will shine on Cuba.

These are just a few of the examples of the terror and trauma that is Cuba today. The "socialist paradise" is a tropical gulag. The quest for justice that once inspired the Cuban people has now become a grab for power. And as with all totalitarian systems, Cuba's regime no doubt has other horrors still unknown to the rest of the world. Once revealed, they will shock the conscience of humanity, and they will shame the regime's defenders and all those democracies that have been silent. One former Cuban political prisoner, Armando Valladares, puts it this way: It will be a time when "mankind will feel the revulsion it felt when the crimes of Stalin were brought to light." And that time is coming.

As we speak, calls for fundamental change are growing across the island. Peaceful demonstrations are spreading. Earlier this year, leading Cuban dissidents came together for the first time to issue the Unity of Freedom, a declaration for democratic change. They hear the dying gasps of a failed regime. They know that even history's cruelest nightmares cannot last forever. A restive people who long to rejoin the world at last have hope, and they will bring to Cuba a real revolution, a revolution of freedom, democracy, and justice.

Now is the time to support the democratic movements growing on the island. Now is the time to stand with the Cuban people as they stand up for their liberty. And now is the time for the world to put aside its differences and prepare for Cuban's transition to a future of freedom and progress and promise. The dissidents of today will be the nation's leaders tomorrow. And when freedom finally comes, they will surely remember who stood with them.

The Czech Republic and Hungary and Poland have been vital sources of support and encouragement to Cuba's brave democratic opposition. I ask other countries to follow suit. All nations can make tangible efforts to show public support for those who love freedom on the island. They can open up their Embassies in Havana to prodemocracy leaders and invite them to different events. They can use their lobbies of the Embassies to give Cubans access to the Internet and to books and to magazines. They can encourage their country's nongovernmental organizations to reach out directly to Cuba's independent civil society.

Here at home we can do more as well. The United States Congress has recently voted for additional funding to support Cuban democracy efforts. I thank you all for your good work on this measure, and I urge you to get the bill to my desk as soon as we possibly can. I also urge our Congress to show our support and solidarity for fundamental change in Cuba by maintaining our embargo on the dictatorship until it changes.

Cuba's regime uses the U.S. embargo as a scapegoat for Cuba's miseries. Yet Presidents of both our political parties have long understood that the source of Cuba's suffering is not the embargo but the Communist system. They know that trade with the Cuban Government would not help the Cuban people until there are major changes to Cuba's political and economic system. Instead, trade with Cuba would merely enrich the elites in power and strengthen their grip. As long as the regime maintains its monopoly over the political and economic life of the Cuban people, the United States will keep the embargo in place.

The United States knows how much the Cuban people are suffering, and we have not stood idle. Over the years, we've granted asylum to hundreds of thousands who have fled the repression and misery imposed by the regime. We've rallied nations to take up the banner of Cuban liberty, and we will continue to do so. We've authorized private citizens and organizations to provide food and medicine and other aid—amounting to more than $270 million last year alone. The American people, the people of this generous land, are the largest providers of humanitarian aid to the Cuban people in the entire world.

The aid we provide goes directly into the hands of the Cuban people, rather than into the coffers of the Cuban leaders. And that's really the heart of our policy: to break the absolute control that the regime holds over the material resources that the Cuban people need to live and to prosper and to have hope.

To further that effort, the United States is prepared to take new measures right now to help the Cuban people directly, but only if the Cuban regime, the ruling class, gets out of the way.

For example—here's an interesting idea to help the Cuban people—the United States Government is prepared to license nongovernmental organizations and faith-based groups to provide computers and Internet access to Cuban people, if Cuba's rulers will end their restrictions on Internet access for all the people.

Or the United States is prepared to invite Cuban young people whose families suffer oppression into the Partnership for Latin American Youth Scholarship Programs to help them have equal access to greater educational opportunities, if the Cuban rulers will allow them to freely participate.

We make these offers to the people of Cuba, and we hope their rulers will allow them to accept. You know, we've made similar offers before, but they've been rejected out of hand by the regime. It's a sad lesson, and it should be a vivid lesson for all: For Cuba's ruling class, its grip on power is more important than the welfare of its people.

Life will not improve for Cubans under their current system of government. It will not improve by exchanging one dictator for another. It will not improve if we seek accommodation with a new tyranny in the interests of "stability." America will have no part in giving oxygen to a criminal regime victimizing its own people. We will not support the old way with new faces, the old system held together by new chains. The operative word in our future dealings with Cuba is not "stability." The operative word is "freedom."

In that spirit, today I'm also announcing a new initiative to develop an international multibillion dollar Freedom Fund for Cuba. This fund would help the Cuban people rebuild their economy and make the transition to democracy. I have asked two members of my Cabinet to lead the effort, Secretary Rice and Secretary Gutierrez. They will enlist foreign governments and international organizations to contribute to this initiative.

And here's how the fund will work. The Cuban Government must demonstrate that it has adopted, in word and deed, fundamental freedoms. These include the freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of press, freedom to form political parties, and the freedom to change the Government through periodic, multiparty elections. And once these freedoms are in place, the fund will be able to give Cubans—especially Cuban entrepreneurs—access to grants and loans and debt relief to help rebuild their country.

The restoration of these basic freedoms is the foundation of fair, free, and competitive elections. Without these fundamental protections in place, elections are only cynical exercises that give dictatorships a legitimacy they do not deserve.

We will know there is a new Cuba when opposition parties have the freedom to organize, assemble, and speak with equal access to the airwaves. We will know there is a new Cuba when a free and independent press has the power to operate without censors. We will know there is a new Cuba when the Cuban Government removes its stranglehold on private economic activity.

And above all, we will know there is a new Cuba when authorities go to the prisons, walk to the cells where people are being held for their beliefs, and set them free. It will be a time when the families here are reunited with their loved ones and when the names of free people—including dissidents such as Oscar Elias Biscet, Normando Hernandez Gonzalez, and Omar Rodriguez Saludes—are free. It will be a moment when Cubans of conscience are released from their shackles—not as a gesture or a tactic, but because the Government no longer puts people in prison because of what they think or what they say or what they believe.

Cuba's transition from a shattered society to a free country may be long and difficult. Things will not always go as hoped. There will be difficult adjustments to make. One

of the curses of totalitarianism is that it affects everyone. Good people make moral compromises to feed their families, avoid the whispers of neighbors, and escape a visit from the secret police. If Cuba is to enter a new era, it must find a way to reconcile and forgive those who have been part of the system but who do not have blood on their hands. They're victims as well.

At this moment, my words are being transmitted into—live into Cuba by media outlets in the free world, including Radio and TV Marti. To those Cubans who are listening—perhaps at great risk—I would like to speak to you directly.

Some of you are members of the Cuban military or the police or officials in the Government. You may have once believed in the revolution. Now you can see its failure. When Cubans rise up to demand their liberty, they deserve—they—the liberty they deserve, you've got to make a choice. Will you defend a disgraced and dying order by using force against your own people? Or will you embrace your people's desire for change? There is a place for you in the free Cuba. You can share the hope found in the song that has become a rallying cry for freedom-loving Cubans on and off the island: "*Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando*"—our day is coming soon.

To the ordinary Cubans who are listening: You have the power to shape your own destiny. You can bring about a future where your leaders answer to you, where you can freely express your beliefs, and where your children can grow up in peace. Many experts once said that that day could never come to Eastern Europe or Spain or Chile. Those experts were wrong. When the Holy Father came to Cuba and offered God's blessings, he reminded you that you hold your country's future in your hands. And you can carry this refrain in your heart: *Su dia ya viene llegando*—your day is coming soon.

To the schoolchildren of Cuba: You have a lot in common with young people in the United States. You both dream of hopeful futures, and you both have the optimism to make those dreams come true. Do not believe the tired lies you are told about America. We want nothing from you except to welcome you to the hope and joy of freedom. Do not fear the future. *Su dia ya viene llegando*—your day is coming soon.

Until that day, you and your suffering are never far from our hearts and prayers. The American people care about you. And until we stand together as free men and women, I leave you with a hope, a dream, and a mission: *Viva Cuba Libre*.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:20 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to President Fidel Castro Ruz of Cuba. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on Senate Confirmation of Leslie H. Southwick as United States Circuit Judge for the Fifth Circuit

October 24, 2007

The confirmation of Judge Leslie Southwick to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit is a victory for America's judicial system and for the citizens of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Today's bipartisan vote resolves a longstanding judicial emergency and will help ensure that the Fifth Circuit can operate more effectively. Judge Southwick is a man of character and intelligence who will apply the law fairly. I appreciate the Senate's approval of his nomination.

While today's vote resolves one judicial emergency, many of America's Federal courts continue to have unnecessary vacancies. I have nominated highly qualified men and women to serve on these courts. Now the Senate must act. In the final 2 years of the past 3 administrations, the Senate has confirmed an average of 17 circuit court judges. But since January of this year, the Senate has confirmed only five circuit court nominees. The Senate has more work to do. I once again call upon the Senate to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities and promptly provide these nominees fair up-or-down votes.