

FIDEL CASTRO: KIDNAPER (PART I)

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FIDEL CASTRO: KIDNAPER (PART I)

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2000

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:30 p.m. in room SD-419, Dirksen Senator Office Building, Hon. Jesse Helms (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Present: Senator Helms.

Also present: Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

The CHAIRMAN. This is a public meeting, it is not a formal hearing of the committee. There are games being played in the U.S. Senate by the minority party. They have objected to all committee meetings, so this is not a formal committee meeting, but it is an occasion for us to get together and to make a public record of a very important situation.

The Foreign Relations Committee, with this meeting, is beginning a series to remind anybody with a short memory just who and what Fidel Castro really is. Now, well-financed U.S. business groups declare that Castro is a potential business partner. Well, they had better wake up and smell the coffee, because the facts are that he is a deadbeat who has stolen property on a massive scale and has swindled just about everybody dumb enough to try to trade with him.

The Washington lobbyists have convinced American farmers that the bankrupt Castro Government can somehow solve the financial problems of the farmers, but even if Castro imported all of the U.S. farm products he could afford, the income to American farmers would amount to considerably less than what Miami and Dade Counties spend on garbage collection in just a few months.

And Mr. Castro brags about Cuba's health system, but Cubans are denied access to medicines and medical care, that are reserved for foreigners who are paying the dollars for it.

Fidel Castro is portrayed as a misunderstood nationalist who wants nothing more than mutually respectful relations with the United States. Bosh and nausea. Cuban spies are now standing trial in Florida for the murder of American citizens. That is the kind of respectful relations Fidel Castro wants with this country.

During the tragic events surrounding the Elian Gonzalez case, Fidel Castro was portrayed by the media as a sort of grandfather figure, but no other man alive has done more to shatter families. Children whose parents have fled the island of Cuba have been waiting years for Castro's permission to join their parents in free-

dom. Now, that is the real Fidel Castro, and this afternoon we are going to hear testimony about Fidel Castro the kidnaper.

Now, our two witnesses, Leonel—

Dr. CORDOVA. Leonel Cordova.

The CHAIRMAN. Leonel Cordova and Noris Pena are Cuban doctors who defected this past May from a Cuban medical mission in Zimbabwe. While awaiting asylum they were kidnaped by Zimbabwean police and by Cuban “diplomats,” who were under orders from Castro to force those two doctors to come back to Havana. But that kidnaping was thwarted because they passed a note to an Air France crew who refused to let them aboard, and by the time the two doctors were forced back to Zimbabwe their kidnaping was discovered and the two governments were shamed into releasing them, but only after locking them in jail for a month.

Now, since their defection, Dr. Cordova’s wife and two children have been evicted from their home in Cuba by this nice, grandfatherly Fidel Castro. Dr. Pena’s parents have U.S. visas but have been denied permission to leave Cuba.

Now, the story is about Fidel Castro the kidnaper. Recently, Castro has painted a different image of himself by offering to send doctors to poor areas of the United States, particularly Mississippi. That was not overlooked by Mississippi Senators, who are not going to be standing at the border line welcoming them to come in. In fact, our witnesses will testify that Castro uses these missions as little more than cynical propaganda tools. Indeed, our witnesses were not allowed to touch a single patient in Zimbabwe during the 2 months that they were posted in that poor country.

So few people realize that Castro quietly charges these desperately poor countries for so-called volunteer doctors whom he sends around the country, or the world. Zimbabwe, for example, is reported to have paid Castro \$1 million a month for a “medical mission,” that was not even allowed to treat patients.

So you see, everything Castro does is a cynical show to line his pockets or to make him appear benevolent, instead of the cruel dictator that he is. These medical missions Castro sends around do both.

With that, I wish the other Senators could be here, but they had other things to do. Anyway, I am going to ask our witnesses to make brief opening statements. I welcome you to the committee, and while I am at it, welcome to freedom.

You may proceed.

**STATEMENT OF DR. LEONEL CORDOVA RODRIGUEZ;
ACCOMPANIED BY: DR. NORIS PENA**

Dr. CORDOVA. Mr. Chairman, Senators, good afternoon. First of all, we would like to apologize for our English, but we will try our best to express to you what happened to us in Zimbabwe and how the Cuban Government was involved in this issue.

We were there as part of a medical mission composed of 107 health workers that arrived on March 20 of this year. On April 23, we decided to defect and, after going to the main opposition newspaper in Zimbabwe, we made a declaration against the Cuban Government’s policy in regard to our mission and our general disagreement with Castro’s regime.

After going to the Canadian and American Embassies asking for political asylum, and having our request ignored, we entered into a process with the U.N. Representatives to try and seek a resolution to our problems. As time went by, the Cuban Government declared that we had not done anything against the law, and that we would not be prosecuted.

However, Cuban forces, accompanied by Zimbabwean officials, intercepted us and made many offers to try and convince us that we had no chance of escaping, and that our families in Cuba would suffer a lot because of what we were doing.

On June 2, we were abducted from a friend's house by four Zimbabwean officials, who pointed automatic weapons at us and led us to the immigration department. They prevented us from any kind of contact with the U.N. officials. Once in the building, they tried to force us to sign a false permission to stay in the country, but we refused. A second document declaring us prohibited persons in Zimbabwe and declaring our sentence to be deported to Cuba was offered later.

They even tried to fingerprint us forcibly, but we also refused this.

By coincidence, having not followed their instruction to remain in the room, I saw the Consul of the Cuban Embassy outside in the hallway. Almost immediately I was almost handcuffed, which proved to me that Zimbabwean officials were acting on the instruction of the Cuban Government.

Later, they conducted us straight to the airport, where we witnessed the presence of the Ambassador, Sarracino, the Consul, Harare—I do not know the second name—and the chief of the medical mission, Dr. Bustillo. We were put into a South African plane, escorted by two Zimbabwean officers.

Once in South Africa, the Cuban Embassy representatives were waiting for us to reaffirm their custody of us during transit. Responding to Cuban Embassy officials, the Zimbabweans told them that they did not have even assent to pay any of the transportation costs, because the Cuban Government had the responsibility of providing everything we needed, including the travel, the stay in Havana, and the ticket to come back to Harare.

We also saw that we were traveling with false passports doctored by the Cuban Embassy in Zimbabwe. At the time of boarding the Air France plane, the Cuban officials were pushing us into the plane, while the air crew was trying to do the contrary. Then we passed a note to the flight attendant, which he passed on to the U.N. in Geneva and the Miami Herald. Because of this, our case became public, because of that note.

We spent 2 days in South Africa restrained by the Cubans and Zimbabweans until we were sent back to Harare. They did not inform the U.N. of our whereabouts, and Zimbabwean officials came to see us in prison and transmitted a message from the Cuban Ambassador giving us the chance of returning to Cuba and facing the consequences of our behavior. They made us sign the document declaring us prohibited persons and gave us the opportunity to leave the country in 72 hours. However, they did not release us to do it.

We asked for the visit of the ambassador, but he never appeared. We were mistreated at all times on any type of communications to

the U.N. or other embassies to find a quick solution to our case. We were obstructed by Cuban and Zimbabwean Governments. The director of the UNHCR offices informed us about the maneuvers of both governments to ruin our asylum case, and they were very concerned about the presence of a Cuban plane in a nearby country, sent there to pick us up.

The Cuban President had decided for us where we could travel, violating our right to self-determination. Upset by our departure to Sweden, he made a last attempt to ruin the trip. He forbade us to travel with our Cuban passports, and forced the U.N. to give us a special document, because according to the Cuban officials we were not Cubans any more.

But what influenced us to take the decision of the flight and express our decision to the Castro regime, to give you an idea how we came to this decision, we would like to talk about our field as doctors, and health care in general in Cuba. The last few years, the problem of keeping up with the health care of the Cuban population has gotten worse. The different services, depending on who you are, the conditions of preparation for those in our field, the misuse of resources, and the level of satisfaction of health workers are elements that show us that those responsible for our disgraceful situation is solely this totalitarian regime imposed by communism in Cuba.

In the meantime, foreign tourists and Cuban leaders enjoy the best medical attention in well-equipped hospitals, without feeling the lack of resources and what the human cost is to the Cuban population, who in turn are subjected to the worse restrictions. While in the dollar shops you can find the assistance of many resources, these are not at the reach of the average Cuban. Made in Cuba, but property only of the Cuban Government.

Meanwhile, the Cuban medical students who will be responsible for the population's health are training now in adverse situations without advanced medical texts and with obsolete lab equipment and inhuman living conditions, while foreigners are studying in the American medical school in Havana enjoying, as a free gift, the easier conditions to develop and achieve quality education. The vast majority of them, millionaires in their countries of origin, as we saw in Zimbabwe.

The association of the Cuban pharmaceutical industry with foreign enterprises has allowed its development, and consequently the production of drugs that only can be seen by Cubans in foreign health fairs, and that are barely administered to the needy patients on the island.

The level of satisfaction of health care workers has decreased drastically, due to the lack of ability of the worker and his family to live a dignified human existence. Apart from the right to live and return to their country, they have been prohibited, as well as the freedom of consciousness, expression, thought, and association. Everybody that makes public his opposition to the Castro regime is harassed, persecuted, and sent to prison.

The previous are just a minimal expression of a wide list of events that are caused by Castro's tyranny. We consider that only cutting the umbilical cord that sustains his empire—by this, we mean suspending any kind of external aid—we can suffocate the

malignancy that is killing us today and has provoked a deep wound in the heart of the Cuban people.

Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, thank you, sir. Before we proceed, we have a good many young people in the back of the room and I would like for them to have copies of the doctor's testimony. How can we handle that? Would you like to have a copy so you can study the writing of it? If we can get 15 or 20 copies, maybe some of them can share.

Now, the questions are going to be translated, I am told, so I will talk very slowly.

Doctor, if the kidnaping had succeeded, and if you had been delivered back to Cuba, what do you think would have happened to you when you got back to Cuba?

Dr. CORDOVA. In the best case, we were in prison for 20 to 30 years. In the worst, everybody can imagine what could happen in these cases. We would be killed.

The CHAIRMAN. I want you to tell us about your two separate visits to the Embassy of the United States. Whom did you talk with there? Do you remember?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. In the first case, in the first visit we talked to the consular officer, consul, the consul. Her name is—Theresa Thompson, could be? Theresa Thompson—Theresa Brown, and with another man who was identified as Diego, was the name that he gave us.

In the second chance, we saw the same person.

The CHAIRMAN. The same person. Did he seem interested, disinterested, or what?

Dr. CORDOVA. In the first case—in the first visit they—I mean, they took a lot of notes, and they said that we had to get in touch with the U.N. offices, because in the meantime did not take the decision—they could not do anything for us.

In the second opportunity—

The CHAIRMAN. This is the Embassy of the United States that told you they could not do anything for you.

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. Yes. They said they could not do anything in that moment for us.

The CHAIRMAN. Did you make clear to them that you two had been harassed by the Cuban Government?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. In the second visit, we rushed to the American Embassy because previous to this moment we were harassed by the rapid response brigades of the Cuban Government organized in Zimbabwe, composed by the doctors, the same doctors. I can give you even the name. Everybody knows it. Dr. Bustillo, the chief of the mission, is the chief of the rapid response brigades in Zimbabwe, I mean, to attack any action like this, like we did, you know.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Pena, I would like to have your answers to these questions, too. Now, I am going very slowly so that I can be understood, so I will just proceed at this point. This is a question to both of you.

When you visited the U.S. Embassy you were told that you would have to check in with the United Nations—is that approximately

so? That they could not do anything for you at the U.S. Embassy, is that so?

Dr. PENA [through translator]. Yes. They said that they could not do anything at that moment for them, that they would have to direct their case to the United Nations, and they would have to begin the process, that nothing could be done at the U.S. Embassy at that time.

Dr. CORDOVA. In the second opportunity, we told them that we were interfered by the Cuban rapid response brigade, and we were afraid for our life, because they could do everything to disappear us, as they did later.

The CHAIRMAN. And you made clear, in other words, that you felt abandoned, because they would not give you asylum, meaning they, the U.S. Embassy?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. I could not say I was abandoned, because I did not know the procedures, but I felt as if I were abandoned. I did not know where should I go to solve my problem as soon as possible.

Dr. PENA. They did not realize the seriousness of the case until they were almost returned back to Cuba, and from that point on there was a realization.

The CHAIRMAN. Now, you said, she said they did not realize the seriousness?

Dr. PENA. No. The American Embassy, I guess, did not—to her understanding, did not understand what the seriousness of their case was.

Dr. CORDOVA. Until the abduction took place.

The CHAIRMAN. Well, I think it was a case of benign neglect at best. They just did not want to get involved. Is that not really the case?

Dr. CORDOVA. I do not know.

The CHAIRMAN. You do not know. Of course you do not.

Well, I wish you would tell me in detail what is happening to your families back in Cuba?

Dr. CORDOVA. As soon as we defected they were informed that they had to abandon as soon as possible, just in a few days, the place that we were living in. That place belongs to the government, and apart from it, they were depriving from my money that I earned for my stay in Zimbabwe. Later, when I made public this kind of maneuvers, Fidel Castro gave to my wife not only the money that I had earned, but much more, and the CDR—I mean, the communist organizations made everything possible and impossible for becoming their life miserable.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Pena.

Dr. PENA. She says there has been a lot of indirect effects, as well as direct effects to her family, including a lot of negative reports that have come out in the Cuban-controlled media about their situation.

Their family and friends have told them not to turn on the television or read the reports because of the type of negative things that are being portrayed about their case, and at work they have received a lot of pressure and harassment, in the neighborhood as well. They are afraid to open their door at home because they do not know if it is someone coming for something good or bad.

The CHAIRMAN. OK. Now, are you trying to arrange to bring your families to the United States?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes, of course. In our case specifically I want to announce that recently the Government of Fidel Castro is instructing the father of my stepson to not allow him to—I mean, to not allow him, his son, to come here once the United States of America gives to my family the opportunity to come. It is very important for us because—I mean, to have our family here, because they are really under a great pressure. They are going to suffer a lot. Our family—I mean, I have three children. Two of them could come fortunately, but one unfortunately has to stay there.

In the school they are going to suffer a lot. You know, the instruction in Cuba is pure Communist, and they do not allow anybody to—I mean, to say any other different, you know, because my sons, my children are son and daughter of a betrayer, and it is well enough to be the sufferer because of it.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Pena.

Dr. PENA. Her family has the advantage of having just recently won the lottery. Unfortunately, both of them are doctors. This is an unfortunate situation in Cuba, and besides the fact that they have a visa, they are not allowed exit.

Dr. CORDOVA. And the harassment, the harassment has been extended not only to my wife and to my children, even, I had an uncle who came here the last June because his son was dying, and died here in Miami. For the first time he came to visit his son, and when he decided to return to Cuba, because he had a lot of family there, wife and children, he has no job any more. I mean, he is not working now because of it, because he is—his nephew is a betrayer is the reason he is not working now in Cuba.

The CHAIRMAN. So they are punishing him for what you have done. Is that—

Dr. CORDOVA. Pardon? Sorry?

The CHAIRMAN. They are punishing him—

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. For what you have done.

Dr. CORDOVA. Because of me.

The CHAIRMAN. Let me ask parenthetically, what is your specialty? What kind of medical doctor are you, sir?

Dr. CORDOVA. General practitioner.

The CHAIRMAN. General practitioner.

Dr. PENA. General dentist.

The CHAIRMAN. Dentist. Castro has offered, as I said in my statement, to send Cuban doctors to treat poor people in the United States. What do you think is behind Castro's proposal? Let her answer first, and you tell her what the question is.

Dr. CORDOVA. Obviously, he is anxious to introduce Communist idea in this country, first of all. I think it would be interesting, you should allow them to come to see what happens, what could happen, because in spite of the—I mean, this detachment is going to be very, very well selected by the Cuban Government.

I mean, most of them, the vast majority are going to belong to its—the Communist Party, of course, but the problem is, once people are out of Cuba and can see the rest of the world, and you can open your eyes, and you can prove that everything that you have

learned for years is false, everybody is going to do something for staying here, or just for telling that Fidel Castro has been lying to us all the time, you know.

Dr. PENA. She says she thinks it is a wonderful idea to see what would happen once they arrive here, and what his response would be.

Dr. CORDOVA. I would not lose the chance.

The CHAIRMAN. I want you to speculate just a little bit for me. Suppose, just suppose that Castro were to send 500 physicians to the United States. How many of them do you think would go back to Cuba voluntarily?

Dr. PENA. In the best case scenario, one would probably go back.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you agree with that?

Dr. CORDOVA. How many would return?

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, voluntarily.

Dr. CORDOVA. No one.

The CHAIRMAN. Zero, zilch.

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes, sure.

The CHAIRMAN. Besides kidnaping, what other steps—and I know the answer to this question, but I want you to give your opinion by giving your answer. Besides the kidnaping that goes on and the other awful things that have happened since this man took over Cuba, what other steps does Castro take to coerce people to come back to Cuba?

Let me elaborate just a little bit. Does Castro send members of his intelligence service, or so-called rapid response brigades to get them to come back, or persuade them to come back?

Dr. CORDOVA. First of all he has formed, as I told before, the rapid response brigades that are all the time following all your steps, all what you do. Everything what you do has been—I mean, he has a very tight surveillance over the rest of the people who is in the brigade but he has a very powerful weapon in his hand. He has in jail in the meantime the family.

I mean, in the big jail, in Cuba, he has their family, and you know, if you defect, not only you are going to be—I mean, are going to suffer the consequences of your acts, but your family mainly is going to suffer. No more job, no more money, no more anything, discrimination—I mean, more discrimination, OK. I think it is the best weapon he has to make everybody return to Cuba.

The CHAIRMAN. Very well.

Dr. CORDOVA. The family.

Dr. PENA. One of the other things is to do just what he did to them, which is to put them in jail for a month.

Dr. CORDOVA. It is an example for the rest of the people who are working in Africa, but obviously it has not punished them, because they are now some of them in Zambia, for example.

The CHAIRMAN. Did you volunteer for this work in Zimbabwe? You volunteered for that?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. Yes, because it is the only chance that Cubans can get abroad. I mean, can know something different from the reality of Cuba. It is the only chance. Cubans are not allowed to go to any other country, mainly doctors and teachers are not allowed to travel. Even having a visa, having all the costs covered

by someone from abroad, the money, everything, is not allowed, and it is a good chance to travel.

The CHAIRMAN. Did you pay your own expenses to go to Zimbabwe, or did the Cuban Government pay your expenses?

Dr. CORDOVA. The Cuban Government paid.

The CHAIRMAN. Is that true of you, Dr. Pena?

Dr. PENA. She did not pay for it, but she is not sure if it was the Cuban Government that paid for the expenses or the Zimbabwean Government.

The CHAIRMAN. I am almost afraid to ask this question, but when you volunteered to go, did you ponder the possibility that you might end up in the United States of America and get citizenship here?

Dr. PENA. She said that she had made up her mind once she left Cuba, wherever that is that she would have to find another destination, that she did not want to return. She did not know where she was going to end up, but did not want to return.

The CHAIRMAN. Is that approximately your—

Dr. CORDOVA. The same. It is the same.

The CHAIRMAN. They keep telling me that the vote has started, but I am going to stay here a little bit longer.

Now, an audio tape is being made of all this, as I instructed.

Yesterday, we saw again the tragic results of the Castro regime's brutality, when those 10 Cubans who were desperate for freedom fled in that small, ill-equipped crop-dusting plane. Now, that plane crashed, and while most of the people aboard survived, it is uncertain whether they will be given refuge in the United States or whether they will be sent back to Cuba.

Now, the Castro regime is claiming that this was a hijacking, a claim belied by the fact that the pilot stopped off to pick up his own wife, his children, and some friends before heading out over the open sea. Even so, the Clinton-Gore administration is likely to return these 10 Cubans to Havana, as they have done time and time again before, because they were not lucky enough to get their dry feet on U.S. soil.

Now, as Cuban citizens, and feeling the way you do about the tyranny of the Castro regime, what do you believe will happen to these 10 individuals in that plane crash if they are forcibly returned to Cuba? Do you understand my question?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes. Those people that were in the plane?

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, sir.

Dr. CORDOVA. Obviously they are going to be in jail, because they—I do not know really what their story consists of, but for the matter of getting a plane from Cuba to any other country, as well enough to express, or try to express indirectly their disagreement with the government, is well enough to be sent to jail.

The CHAIRMAN. Would you like to comment on that?

Dr. PENA. She says she agrees that undoubtedly they would be sent to prison, at the least.

The CHAIRMAN. I have just been handed some great news. Where is the Congresslady? I do not want you to sit back there. I want you to come up here, please.

Now, you know that all those lights mean there is a vote. Since this is informal, the other side of the Chamber will not let us have

a hearing, so we are just having a public meeting, of which a record will be kept, whether they like it or not, so if you will identify yourself for the record and take over here while I go vote.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. What a great honor. Thank you, Senator Helms. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Miami, Florida, and I am very proud that the doctors are now constituents of my congressional district in Miami—the 18th district of Florida. We welcome them to our country. We welcome them especially to our community, and that is the community of—Senator Helms, that is the community of free people.

The CHAIRMAN. That is right. We want to keep you here, OK.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Senator.

The CHAIRMAN. Take over.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you. I had had the opportunity of meeting with the doctors, and I know that their plight in Zimbabwe was harrowing. Then they had the detention followed by immigration limbo once they got to their temporary destination before the United States. I want to ask them if they believe that the ruler of Zimbabwe's friendship with Fidel Castro and their long years of cooperation was a factor in their detention for 32 days. Do you think that it was pressure from the Castro regime that had you in this situation for so long?

Dr. CORDOVA. Obviously, he was behind the scenario, you know. He was behind everything. Castro commanded everything that happened to us, because he wanted to give an example to the rest of the people who was working there, you know, and obviously Mugabe did everything that Fidel Castro wanted.

Dr. PENA. Also, it was openly said that Fidel Castro made a call to Mugabe and told him not to permit their exit from the country.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. I think that that is very important, when you point out that there was an actual call from Fidel Castro to the Zimbabwe leader asking him to take certain action, and this was told to you how? How do you know about that?

Dr. CORDOVA. The director of the UNHCR office in Zimbabwe, our lawyer, who is a representative of UNHCR that worked for Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi, the director of the region, Mr. Byeuli is the director for these three countries, and everybody who knew it informed us about it, and it was the main reason that we were in jail for more than a month, because in June 9 we had the political refugee status condition, because the Government of the United States gave us this kind of status.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. What do you think that Fidel Castro saw in you? What did you represent to his regime that he would take such a personal interest and involvement to make sure that you would not be granted political asylum? What was it that you represented that he wanted to make sure the world did not see?

Dr. PENA. First of all, he sent them to Africa as health diplomats, quote-unquote. Our desertion set an example to the other physicians that were on the mission as to what could happen, or could be done. That's obviously not convenient for him, nor would he want—and all the things we went through were trying to set a direct example to the other physicians of what could happen to them if they were to—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. So he saw you as a threat to what he was trying to do, in sending you over.

Dr. PENA. A great threat.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And you are obviously children of the "revolution." You grew up only knowing the Castro regime, is that correct?

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. That is the only life that you have known, and you knew that there was another life out there available for you.

You know that here in the United States we have a lot of pressure from mostly business community leaders to try to lift the embargo on Cuba. I noticed in your testimony something very interesting, as professionals in the medical field you were saying that foreign tourists and Cuban revolutionary leaders enjoy the best medical attention in luxurious and well-equipped hospitals, without feeling the lack of resources and the human cost to the Cuban population, who, in turn, are subjected to the worst restrictions.

While in the dollar shops you can find the existence of many resources, they are not at the reach of the average Cuban, made in Cuba, but property only of the Cuban Government. As you said, that is so true about the medical attention. Many people do not understand that there is a medical apartheid operating in Cuba, where you have the best facilities and ample medicine and all of the supplies that you need, and that is available for the Communist elite and for the tourists, and for the normal, average citizen of Cuba you cannot even be operated on in a hospital without bringing bed sheets and without bringing many of your own supplies.

A mother cannot give an aspirin to her child, but certainly a tourist can have the best plastic surgery available in the hemisphere, and some people believe here in the U.S. Congress that the Cuban people would get more food and medicine if some restrictions would be lifted, in spite of the fact that there are, in essence, few restrictions on those items.

Do you believe that a movement to lift the restrictions would help Castro by giving him a political victory, or what is your estimation on the issue of food and medicine and the embargo in general?

Dr. PENA. The Cuban people would have more medicine and food once the system within Cuba has changed. The U.S. embargo against Cuba in no way affects the Cuban people. With or without an embargo against Cuba, the Cuban people will continue to suffer the same way, because Fidel Castro and his system is the one that has an embargo against the Cuban people.

Dr. CORDOVA. It is very important to say that in Cuba exists a double health system, one destined to tourism and the leaders of the revolution and their families and friends and so on, and the other, the worst, to the Cuban people.

For example, where the confusion take place, for example, Fidel Castro sends a distorted image to the rest of the world, because people—I mean, people from United States or people from any other country that go to Cuba, he is going to—I mean, they are going to visit the Manos e Majedas Hospital, and to tell you the

truth, it is the hospital for the population attention, but for a few amount of population attention, of population who lives nearby the hospital, he has equipped the Manos e Majeda, he has organized very well a hospital just to show this kind of—I mean, this hospital to the rest of the world, but I would invite him—I invite him to show you the Castilla Juasia Hospital, the Joachim a Bara Hospital, or any other provincial hospital that represents the reality of the Cuban—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. What would someone find if they were to tour those hospitals?

Dr. CORDOVA. Where?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. What would—

Dr. CORDOVA. In the worst hospital, well, the worst conditions. First of all, we have no access to medications needed in some cases to treat a patient. I mean, antibiotics, pain killers, et cetera. Their laboratory means are obsolete. We have no access, only in such cases specially approved by the government, or by the highest sphere of the health minister. By no means we are going to find a way of treating the patient in those hospitals that we are going to find in Manos e Majeda, or much better in other hospitals belonging to the elite of the government.

There is a great, great difference between those hospitals destined for tourism—I mean, if we are going to talk about tourism, it is better, much—it is the best. Everything is there, even medication. I mean, drugs is there. You are going to find—I mean, you have the need of using any specific kind of antibiotics, you are going to find in any drug store, but in dollars, only for tourism, or only for the elite. Even having the money you cannot—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. The tourists who go there, and if they happen to fall ill, they would not have any difficulty in finding medicine, or finding a hospital, or a clinic?

Dr. CORDOVA. No. No.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. So it's not from the lack of supplies, it's who gets those supplies, and the Cuban people are not getting those supplies.

Dr. CORDOVA. Even those drugs made in Cuba, most of them are made in Cuba, they have the access to these kinds of drugs, but the Cuban people have no access to these kinds of drugs.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. You know, what is interesting is that a lot of people talk about the supposed embargo, about food and medicine, and there are actually—there is no restriction when you talk about medicine. You can donate all the medicine that you would like to Cuba, and also you could sell all kinds of medical supplies. You need a license.

What would change in Cuba's health care system if those restrictions, whatever they may be, are supposedly lifted, in fact you could do that right now, and what happens is that every other country in the world can supply Cuba, including the United States, with all of those medicines, but it would not get to that mother with the sick child because it is the delivery system that is always going to the tourist.

Do you see any reforms taking place in Cuba on this front? Do you see any changes at all that more people are getting access, or do you see the same restrictions that have always been in place

with Fidel Castro? In other words, some people think that Fidel Castro will change, and that tomorrow he will allow certain freedoms, whether it is freedom of expression or perhaps freedom of the delivery of health care. Do you see any of those reforms taking place in Castro's Cuba today?

Dr. PENA. A reform to help the Cuban people or to make the situation better has not and will never come from the Castro regime.

Dr. CORDOVA. The Cuban people need more than food and medicine. The Cuban people do really need freedom. We have shown that we can resist any kind of restriction, and history has shown—for example, in 1994, 1993–1994, the Cuban Government lost its connection with the USSR, I mean with the socialists, and in that moment nobody had invested in Cuba. Then, in spite of the Cuban people had nothing to eat—had nothing to eat—the people stay happy—I mean, many, many persons began to show their anxiety, to ask for freedom.

We can remember now the events of August 5, no? Then I think, given what happened later, the foreign enterprises began to invest in Cuba. Then Fidel took again the power, because economically he grew up a leader, then he is squeezing out again the people. We cannot do anything because of him.

I think reducing our role, the external supplies to Cuba, we are not going to squeeze the people, to harm the people, because we accustomed to do it for more than 40 years, but the Cuban Government, Fidel Castro is going to sever a lot, and he has to do a real pressure, because the political pressure has to be previous than the economic pressures. He does not play any role in Cuba. He has to leave the power, and to leave the Cuban people, to leave in command, you know.

I think I don't—I disagree at all with lifting the embargo, because it does not affect the Cuban people. It does affect the Cuban tyranny imposed by Fidel Castro.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, I do not think it is a coincidence that he is one of the wealthiest men in the world—

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [continuing]. And that Cuba is one of the poorest countries, certainly in our hemisphere.

I want to ask you to elaborate a little on the mission of the Cuban doctors. Castro talks a lot about his humanitarian efforts when he sends doctors abroad, and I want to ask some questions about it. First, why do Cuban doctors volunteer for these missions? Are they perceived as humanitarian by the doctors themselves, and are the doctors paid by the government? Also, are some of the doctors trying to volunteer in order to get out of Cuba?

Dr. CORDOVA. At the very beginning, Castro was exporting doctors to receive money because of it. It is the case, for example, of South Africa. It is the case of Brazil, and a lot of small missions.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. You say that he sends doctors—

Dr. CORDOVA. To where they are, and to receive money.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And the Castro regime is paid—

Dr. CORDOVA. Yes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [continuing]. By the governments—

Dr. CORDOVA. By those governments.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN [continuing]. To which he sends doctors?

Dr. CORDOVA. But he—sorry. As time went by, occurred the problem of Mitch Hurricane that affected Central America—mainly Central America, and he sent some American brigades to work for free. The impact on this area in the international opinion was so big that he preferred then not to send any more doctors for money, at least openly, but for free to send the image, in spite of receiving money, and then he did not have any other chance——

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. So after Hurricane Mitch, then he changed it.

Dr. CORDOVA. Of course. Of course.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And he was just sending doctors.

Dr. CORDOVA. Of course. Most of the mission—I mean out of Cuba are for free, mainly in Central America, because the effect is greater for him, selling his image of a good man helping the rest of the world, than taking some—I mean, getting some millions of dollars.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Are those doctors people who would have a lot of work to do in Cuba if they stayed there? They could be helping people in Cuba.

Dr. CORDOVA. Of course.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. But instead Castro is exporting them as part of his political machine.

Dr. CORDOVA. It is interesting, because those brigades are accompanied by a lot of medications, coming from abroad, supposed to be helping, to be in Cuba for helping the Cuban people's needs that are a lot of needs that we have there, and he sends with those brigades later, many patients—a big—I mean, tons of drugs, medical equipment, and doctors for free to other countries.

It is very interesting that now in Cuba we are suffering a lot. I mean, mainly the medical students who in some years are going to treat our patients are suffering a lot of restrictions to study, and he has invented a special program to train, to make training for those people coming from abroad, more than 10,000 for free, and in the very best conditions. Everything is going to them, the best books, food, everything—everything, everything, and why he does not do the same with our people, with our doctors, with the persons who are going to be in charge of our——

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. So he extends them privileges and special categories of attention that he does not give to the Cuban doctors in training?

Noris, did you want to say something?

Dr. PENA. No, ma'am.

Dr. CORDOVA. It happened in the American Medical School. It is in a special place apart from the Havana City. I mean, not in the reach of everyone to see what is going on there, but personally I had a lot of new students in my doctor's office who were being trained in there, and they told me of the conditions.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And the doctors who are sent abroad on these missions, are some of them hoping that they would have the opportunity to defect, and is that one of the problems that Castro had with your defection in Zimbabwe, that it would then start a problem for other doctors thinking that—a problem for Castro with other doctors?

We have had cases in our congressional office of other Cuban doctors in different areas of Africa who are also seeking political asylum and have had difficulties, and I think that—do you believe that your case has spurred them on to perhaps think that they could also apply for political asylum, and then Castro clamped down on them because of your case? What effect do you think your case will have on other medical doctors?

Dr. PENA. We had a lot of motives for doing what we did. One of them is for the professional, the health care workers, and the Cuban people in general to be able to open their eyes, not necessarily in the sense to just run away from the system, but to fight for what it is that we want in Cuba.

Dr. CORDOVA. I think it has been a stimulus to the rest of the doctors, because we have demonstrated that we can reach freedom, that we can express openly what we think, not looking back. I mean, not looking back at the consequences that we can suffer for.

If we died making the attempt, it would be worth—you know, it would be worth it, because it is possible. Someone has to tell to Fidel Castro that he has to leave, and it is the chance for us now.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Now, I notice in your testimony you had said that the head of the Cuban medical mission in Zimbabwe is the head of the Cuban rapid response brigade. Does the Castro regime utilize these medical missions to also infiltrate those countries with Castro intelligence officers? Does he send officials as part of the delegation to spy on doctors such as yourselves?

Dr. PENA. Fidel Castro mistrusts the Cuban people to the extent that were medical workers, or artists, or any type of Cuban that were to leave the island, he would make sure that there is someone there to control them and to keep watch over them.

Dr. CORDOVA. He utilizes the rapid response brigades to maintain control over the doctors. He does not trust anybody.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Now, as I said, you are children of the revolution, grew up only knowing Fidel Castro, and I wanted you to elaborate on how people in your generation view the Castro regime. Could you discuss how the views and opinions of your colleagues, whether they are in the medical profession or people of any profession, what do they say about the Castro regime? What would you say the views are of the common Cuban person on the street?

Dr. PENA. The young Cubans have been deceived by the regime, and they are not in agreement with the regime at all. There is a fear and a lack of decision. There is an indecision as to what to do. That is one of the reasons why we need to speak out, why we need to let people around the world know what is happening in Cuba.

Dr. CORDOVA [through translator]. There is a consensus among my colleagues and among Cubans in general that Fidel is not what the country needs or wants. In one form or another we have been manipulated, and at least our generation and the ones to come after us will do something quickly to try to change the situation.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And what do you say to those individuals who wish to normalize relations with Castro? Your English is good, Leonel.

Dr. CORDOVA. OK.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. I am not going to let you say it in Spanish.

Dr. CORDOVA. I would like to say to them that normalizing relationships with Castro, they are doing it very, very—I mean, they were harming very hard the Cuban people, because we had the expectancies that Fidel Castro and his regime will not be there for not any longer, I mean, not for a long time. Then it would help them. If we provide them with everything to remain in power, the Cuban people's misery is going to be prolonged for the rest of their lives, or for another 40 years, and we cannot conceive something like this.

Dr. PENA. If the situation is bad now, she thinks it is going to get worse if there is a normalization of relations, because Fidel has made it clear that he is not going to change and that the system is not going to change.

Dr. CORDOVA. And I would like to say that lifting the embargo maybe the American people are going to gain a lot of things, I mean, in relation to businesses, travels, et cetera, but in regard to the Cuban people, it is going to be a disaster not only for those who are on the island, but those who are here in Miami, because Fidel Castro will not need any more of us. You know, he is going to take the chance of selecting who can go to the island or who cannot. He does it now, but no one, nobody can go in that moment to Cuba.

I mean, at least Cuban-American people will not be able to go to Cuba any more, and everybody have to think about this important point. Castro is going to select who is going to invest or not in Cuba, and in which area. Then for the American people, for the rest of the world, maybe it could be wonderful, but for the Cuban people, if we would really like the freedom of our people, please, do not do it.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Let me ask you about these Cuban missions. Did Fidel Castro or any of his henchmen ever ask these missions to go to the Cuban jails to visit the Cuban political prisoners? Is there any health care that is going to them at all, and what is the status of the health care situation for the political prisoners currently in Castro's jails? Were you ever asked to go there to provide dentistry, or to provide any health care to the political prisoners?

Dr. PENA. First of all, it is prohibited in Cuba to say that there are political prisoners. They are all considered common prisoners, and so it is not permitted to go and take care of anyone in that situation, much less in the prison.

Dr. CORDOVA. It is really difficult to know who is in jail for political reasons, because for example, when we arrived in Miami, for the first time we knew something about, as we said, the doctor who is in jail because he wanted to express his own opinion, but nobody in Cuba knows anything.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. So Dr. Biscet, whom we have discussed at great length in the U.S. Congress, is not a person whose fight for freedom or democracy and human rights is known to Cubans.

Dr. CORDOVA. He is not known in Cuba. Nobody knows anything about it, about him.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And he's still in jail, after so many months of false detention.

Dr. CORDOVA. In a critical condition in relation to health. His health is not so good, as far as I have read.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. He has been tortured, and beaten, and subjected to very harsh conditions, and some reports indicate he is barely alive, and in solitary confinement, and it seems like a health professional should do something about that if he would be allowed.

Well, unfortunately I am needed over there in the House, so I will recess this public meeting, but thank you so much, doctors. I had a few other questions. We will just have to ask them over a cafe con leche at La Carreta.

Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, the public meeting recessed.]

