



The Honorable Albio Sires, Chair
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International
Economic Policy
House Committee on Foreign Relations
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mark Green, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International
Economic Policy
House Committee on Foreign Relations
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

July 23, 2021

**Re: Amnesty International USA Statement for the Record on “The Historic Protests in
Cuba and the Crackdown on Free Expression”**

On behalf of Amnesty International USA and our members and supporters in the United States, we are grateful to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, Migration and International Economic Policy for holding its July 20 hearing on the Historic Protests in Cuba and the Crackdown on Free Expression. The following is an overview of some of the organization’s key concerns and recommendations.

On July 11, 2021 thousands of people took to the streets in Cuba to peacefully protest over the economy, shortages of medicines, the response to COVID-19, and harsh restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Amnesty International has been closely monitoring the situation despite the fact that Cuban authorities do not allow independent human rights organizations to visit the country, and independent human rights lawyers are prevented from working in the country.

Since 2019, the Cuban population has been facing shortages of food, medicine, and fuel.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues, and in recent months there has been consistent public criticism of food shortages and endless lines formed by

¹ Amnesty International, “Cuba 2020” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/cuba/report-cuba/>
(Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

people trying to buy basic products that have been in short supply.² Lately there have also been reports of power cuts or "blackouts" affecting the supply of drinking water and the preparation of food, in some cases for up to seven hours at a time, as reported in the press and on social networks.³

The July 11 protest was the first time in years that Cubans have taken to the streets by the thousands to demonstrate peacefully in several parts of the country, exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Amid the July 11 protests, Amnesty International has received concerning reports of internet outages that significantly limit access to and dissemination of information as well as arbitrary arrests and excessive use of force by police. While information is rapidly changing, human rights lawyers at Cubalex, a non-governmental organization, have produced a working list of hundreds of people – mostly activists and journalists – who have been detained by the authorities or whose location is unknown following the July 11 protests.⁴ Meanwhile, the non-governmental organization Prisoners Defenders sent a list of 187 individuals to the United Nations Human Rights Commission.⁵ Further, there have been confirmed outages to social media and messaging platforms in Cuba from Monday, July 12, 2021. This includes disruptions to communications programs like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, as well as streaming platforms such as YouTube and Google Video.⁶ There have also been disruptions to telegram servers on ETECSA (Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba, S.A.) and the cellular network, Cubacel, operated by Cuba's sole telecommunications company.⁷

On July 14, representatives from the Prosecutor General's Office and the Ministry of Interior said on state television that they were investigating individual responsibility for the organization of the protests and the "crimes" committed during the protests.⁸ A Colonel representing the Interior Ministry said the majority of those detained were not

² Carmen Sesin and Orlando Matos, "In Cuba, families fear shortages will worsen as Coronavirus affects the economy," NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/cuba-families-fear-shortages-will-worsen-coronavirus-affects-economy-n1230816> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

³ Mario J. Pentón, "Los Cubanos ventilan la frustración por los apagones en las redes sociales. El gobierno responde," El Nuevo Herald, <https://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/mundo/america-latina/cuba-es/article251421653.html> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

⁴ Public Document of Detained and Disappeared People in Cuba: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1-38omFpJdDiKTSBoUOg19tv2nJxtNRS3-2HfVUUwtSw/edit#gid=627497176> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

⁵ Prisoners Defenders, <https://twitter.com/CubanDefenders/status/1415339712450121735> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

⁶ Netblocks, "Social Media Restricted in Cuba Amid Widening Anti-Government Protests" <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-restricted-in-cuba-amid-widening-anti-government-protests-QAdrmwyl> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Video from Hacemos Cuba, <https://www.facebook.com/HacemosCuba/videos/979694139516773/> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

“revolutionary” (meaning not pro-government in Cuba) and many had previous convictions for a range of crimes, including crimes that Amnesty International has previously stated are inconsistent with international standards, such as “public disorder.” The Colonel vowed, “we will find the organizers, the instigators,” and said that those chanting “Patria y Vida” (a song some associate with sparking the protests) would be considered instigators.

On July 15, Amnesty International spoke to an independent journalist and an activist in Cuba who had both experienced physical surveillance by uniformed police officers outside their homes and are unable to leave. Héctor Luis Valdez Cocho, a member of the San Isidro Movement, told Amnesty International he was detained in Sunday’s protests and released on Monday. Since then, he says, police have been surveilling his home 24-hours a day and have told him not to leave. As Amnesty International has previously documented, this amounts to house arrest, and is a violation of international human rights law.⁹

Since July 16, Amnesty International has also spoken to multiple relatives of individuals detained in the context of the July 11 protests. They told the organization that the authorities had not informed them of the whereabouts of their relatives. In one case, the family had not been informed of the relative’s whereabouts for 96 hours. In another case, a family member indicated they had not been able to locate their relative for six days. In none of the cases had relatives received a phone call from their detained family members.

Representatives of the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Ministry of Interior denied that families were not being informed about their detained relatives during a July 20 appearance on Canal Caribe, a state-controlled station.¹⁰ However, no representatives of families or other alternative voices were present during the program. Granma, Cuba’s state newspaper, also tweeted that there were no missing persons, and classified Sunday’s protests as “riots.”¹¹

The rights of detained individuals to communicate with the outside world and to receive visits are fundamental safeguards against human rights violations, including torture or other ill-treatment and enforced disappearance. Furthermore, Cuba is a party to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. According to the Convention, a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or to

⁹ Amnesty International, “Cuba: San Isidro Movement and Allies Under Frightening Levels of Surveillance” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/cuba-san-isidro-movement-allies-under-frightening-levels-surveillance/> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

¹⁰ Video from Hacemos Cuba, <https://www.facebook.com/HacemosCuba/videos/917771592169337/> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

¹¹ Tweet from Granma: https://twitter.com/Granma_English/status/1417906226759880704?s=20 (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

disclose the fate or whereabouts of a person following their detention can amount to an enforced disappearance, a crime under international law.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has also received reports of police and government supporters attacking an Associated Press photojournalist and his camera operator, arrests of at least ten journalists, and police raids that allegedly prevented other reporters from leaving their homes.¹² On July 15, the IACHR condemned the state repression of the protests and said it “considers that official statements branding demonstrators as enemies are inadmissible and reckless. These statements stigmatize protest, foster an atmosphere that tolerates violence, may encourage clashes between citizens, and are incompatible with international standards to protect the right to protest.”¹³

Amnesty International condemns the Cuban government’s shameful and unacceptable response to protests. Repressing people with state force simply for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly is unfortunately an extension of the climate of fear around dissenting voices for decades. Most recently, in December 2020, Amnesty International reported on the frightening levels of surveillance and harassment of the San Isidro Movement, a group of artists, academics, and other thinkers who previously protested the harsh restrictions on freedom of expression.¹⁴ Amnesty International also previously reported in November 2017 on the tactics that Cuban authorities have used for decades to imprison and silence alternative voices in the country using criminal law and arbitrary dismissal from state employment.

Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, one of the leaders of the San Isidro Movement, is currently one of the individuals reportedly detained stemming from the July 11 protests, and reportedly has been charged and transferred to Guanajay prison, according to reports. Amnesty International has named Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara a prisoner of conscience three separate times since March 2020.¹⁵

The July 11 protests in Cuba were truly historic, and Amnesty International has called upon Cuban authorities to protect the Cuban people’s right to demonstrate peacefully. On July 22, Amnesty issued an urgent action condemning the detention of protestors and

¹² The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “The IACHR and Its Special Rapporteurships Condemn State Repression and The Use of Force During Peaceful Social Protests in Cuba, and Call for Dialogue on Citizen Demands,” https://www.oas.org/en/IACHR/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2021/177.asp (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Amnesty International, “Cuba: San Isidro Movement and Allies Under Frightening Levels of Surveillance” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/cuba-san-isidro-movement-allies-under-frightening-levels-surveillance/> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

¹⁵ Amnesty International, “Cuba: Amnesty International names Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara of the San Isidro Movement a prisoner of conscience” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/cuba-presos-conciencia-luis-manuel-otero-alcantara-movimiento-san-isidro/> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

calling upon President Díaz-Canel to immediately and unconditionally release all peaceful protestors.¹⁶ Amnesty International is continuing to monitor the situation and is grateful for the Subcommittee's attention to the issue. We also call on the U.S. government to act on the following recommendations:

1. The United States must urge Cuban authorities to stop repressing peaceful demonstrators and, instead, guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and engage in a genuine dialogue with independent civil society to find effective measures to guarantee human rights.
2. In particular, the U.S. government must lift the embargo imposed since 1994. Cuban authorities have attributed food and supply shortages to the embargo imposed by the United States. The embargo does hinder or limit the possibility of assistance, as Amnesty International has said for decades¹⁷, and as United Nations experts and others have highlighted in the past and in particular, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ The United States must lift the embargo, since it has a disproportionate impact on the economic, social and cultural rights of the Cuban population.
3. Since reports of the protests emerged, there has been a concerning return to Cold War-era rhetoric regarding United States and Cuba relations from U.S. officials. United States officials must refrain from repeating this narrative, and instead embrace a nuanced approach that supports the human rights of the Cuban population and the aforementioned recommendations.

For more information, please contact Amy Fischer, Amnesty International USA's Americas Advocacy Director at (202)768-4082 or afischer@aiusa.org.

Sincerely,

Amy Fischer
Americas Advocacy Director
Amnesty International USA

¹⁶ Amnesty International Urgent Action, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2545052021ENGLISH.pdf> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Cuba: The US Embargo Against Cuba: Its Impact on Economic and Social Rights" <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/cuba-the-us-embargo-against-cuba-its-impact-on-economic-and-social-rights/> (Last Accessed 7/15/2021).

¹⁸ United Nations Human Rights Commission, "US must lift its Cuba embargo to save lives amid COVID-19 crisis, say UN Experts" <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25848&LangID=E> (Last Accessed 7/22/2021).