

NEWS RELEASE

From Congressman Joe Moakley, 9th District, Massachusetts

For Immediate Release
May 7, 1998

Contact: David Carreiro
Steve LaRose
202-225-8273

Congressman Moakley testifies to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade expressing his support of HR 1951, The Cuban Humanitarian Trade Act.

Congressman Joe Moakley (D-MA) testified today before the Subcommittee on Trade of the House Ways and Means Committee. He expressed his concern over continuing US policy regarding a 38 year old embargo on trade with Cuba and his support of HR 1951, the Cuban Humanitarian Trade Act. HR 1951 seeks to remove current restrictions on the sale of food and medicine to Cuba.

In his remarks, Mr. Moakley spoke of the need for the United States to take advantage of the new opportunities for discussions with the Cuban government created by the recently concluded visit of Pope John Paul II.

Moakley said, "We must remember that children do not understand politics or embargoes. But children do feel suffering --they do feel pain. I'll say again that the Cuban people's suffering is not our fault, but I believe the US has a responsibility to not make things worse."

Moakley also testified about his first hand experience observing the continuing suffering of the Cuban people that is a direct result of embargo restrictions affecting the availability of medicine and medical supplies in Cuba. He recounted his visit to a Cuban hospital, just outside of Havana and the young boy he met there. Moakley said, "I vividly recall one young boy that I will never forget. This particular little boy had a heart disorder that is widely treated using the insertion of a plastic shunt. But, because this simple device is made in the United States, and thus unavailable in Cuba, this helpless child was forced to spend 86 days in intensive care -- and nearly died." Moakley continued, "the Pope's visit has created an atmosphere of change in Cuba, we need to move forward. I think it is time we lift the embargo on food and medicine and allow the Cuban people access to the best medical and food supplies the United States has to offer."

The hearing by the Subcommittee on Trade was called for by Rep. Moakley, Rep. Richard Neal (D-MA) and Mr. Charles Rangel (D-NY) upon their return to the United States from Cuba and the papal visit. Mr. Moakley praised Mr. Philip Crane (R-IL), Chairman of the subcommittee for holding this hearing.

Mr. Moakley's full statement is included in this release.

The Honorable Joe Moakley
Statement on U.S. - Cuba Policy
Subcommittee on Trade of the House Ways and Means Committee
May 7, 1998

Chairman Crane, Congressman Matsui, members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to testify before your subcommittee today regarding the United States' policy toward Cuba. I commend you for holding this hearing to look into our Cuba policy, which, frankly, needs a change.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, I visited Cuba this January during the historic visit of Pope John Paul II. Despite the media's decision to turn their coverage to other matters, the Pope's visit has done a great deal to teach the world about Cuba, highlight its problems, introduce us to its many assets, and put a human face on this most mysterious and troubling nation.

Today, many concrete changes have already occurred due to the Pope's courageous efforts. Most visibly, Cuban's are practicing religion more freely in their homeland now, without fear of oppression or crackdown.

During my visit, it was tremendously moving to stand in Revolutionary Square, at the Papal Mass, and to see Catholics openly expressing their faith for the Pope and their God. Many of them couldn't believe they were being allowed to act so openly. This event was a major step forward for Cuba.

I think that it is very important to note that the openness has been allowed to continue. We recently saw Catholics freely celebrating Easter Sunday in the main streets of Havana, and in the small churches of the countryside. Beautiful religious processions wound through the Cuban streets without question or comment from the government. It appears, at least for now, that Castro's strong hand against religion has weakened.

And I am very glad that President Clinton has responded to the openness in Cuba with several positive steps regarding the United States' policy. I applaud the Clinton administration for its moves to allow direct flights for humanitarian aid, to allow family remittances and to work to ease the licencing process for medicines. As I've said many times, we aren't responsible for the suffering of the Cuban people -- Cuba is. But, we also should make it a policy to do what we can to help those in need. Right now, our policy isn't doing that.

The American Association for World Health's five-year study on the Cuban health care system highlighted the desperate plight of the Cuban people. According to their expert medical opinion, the embargo has "dramatically harmed the health and nutrition of large numbers of ordinary Cuban citizens." The report went on to identify malnutrition, poor water quality, lack of medicines and equipment and the lack of medical information as the major causes of the Cuban health care crisis.

The needs in Cuba are tremendous. New, breakthrough medicines that combat cancer and AIDS are not available, doctors re-use disposable gloves until they break, pacemakers for heart patients are virtually impossible to find, extreme shortages in kidney dialysis machines keep patients from receiving treatments, and children's cancer wards go without nausea suppressants for children receiving chemotherapy. The suffering goes on and on.

I believe the steps that President Clinton has taken will begin to lessen some of that suffering. Now, we need to do more, because while the Administration's moves are positive, donations will never be able to affect as many people as direct sales of food and medicines. Donations, while very important, do not always include those items that are most needed. Only through the direct sale of medicines can doctors obtain the exact items they need for proper care. That is why I am a proud co-sponsor of H.R. 1951, the Cuban Humanitarian Trade Act, legislation that will remove U.S. trade restrictions on the sale of food and medicine to Cuba.

I want to say a word about the suffering I just mentioned. While I was in Cuba recently, we visited a pediatric hospital, just outside of downtown Havana. We walked along the wards, and stopped in to visit with the sick children and their parents. This was real life -- there were no politics here, no state symbols, no speeches. I listened carefully to the young mothers, describing their children's unwarranted suffering and pain.

Many of the children that I visited that day had fairly common diseases and disorders that are easily curable using modern techniques and medicines. In the United States we have the best medicines, the best medical training, and the most innovative medical devices in the world. But the sad truth is that most of these items are not available to these tiny Cuban children, due to the embargo.

I vividly recall one child that I will never forget. This particular little boy had a heart disorder that is widely treated using the insertion of a plastic shunt. But, that simple device is made in America, and therefore not available in Cuba. So this helpless child spent 86 days in intensive care -- and nearly died. During that terrible ordeal, the little boy lost a lung, and will have continued health problems for years to come. His young mother told me she didn't understand why they couldn't get that piece of plastic. She looked to me for answers, Mr. Chairman -- I had none.

I know opponents will say there is no embargo on medicine. They will say anything can be obtained with a licence. But the fact is, that's just not happening. The process is extremely slow and difficult, and most U.S. companies don't even try. Now, the facts are often disputed here, but even the most generous estimates say that we have only issued 27 licenses for the commercial sale of medicines over the last six years. For a country with the medical needs of Cuba, that's not a lot of medicine.

There are many reasons why the licencing process doesn't work. For one, U.S. companies don't want to go through the difficult steps and the paperwork. And many U.S. corporations don't even know they **can** sell to Cuba through a licence.

Opponents will also say that Cuba can go to any other country in the world to buy medicines. That is true, but the problem is that the United States is the leader in medicines, medical supplies, medical techniques, and everything else that has the prefix med- before it. The fact is that Cuba needs our innovative products and ideas, because, quite simply we're the best and we've got the corner on the market.

Furthermore, we passed a law in 1992 that prevents subsidiaries abroad from doing business in Cuba. As the economy has gotten more and more global, U.S. pharmaceutical and medical supply companies have increased their share of ownership around the world. Today, U.S. owned subsidiaries dominate the market abroad. So, when Cuba looks to other countries for medicines they often run into more roadblocks.

Mr. Chairman, the Pope's visit has created an atmosphere of change in Cuba that hasn't been seen since the revolution. And, I don't think things will go back to the ways of the past. It's too hard to "put the genie back in the bottle", as they say. So we need to move forward. I think it is time we lift the embargo on food and medicines and allow the Cuban people access to the best medical and food supplies we have to offer.

We need to engage Cuba so we can effect change now, and in the future when the political status quo is gone. Our isolationism of the last 38 years has done nothing to change Cuba -- in fact I believe it is one reason Castro has been able to stay in power for so long. Quite simply, our embargo policy has given him an enemy to point to.

Now, we have a historic opportunity before us. We need to be part of Cuba's changing political and social situation by engaging in a dialogue of thoughts and ideas. We need to be ready for the day when Castro is gone. After Castro, there is a giant vacuum of leadership in Cuba. No one really knows for sure who will fill that vacuum. Continuing our current policy leaves us without any influence. We will have no say in the future political leadership of our neighboring island. But, by engaging Cuba now, the United States will have a hand in the future, and can work to bring democratic ideals to the Cuban people. Lifting restrictions on food and medicine is a good way to begin that engagement.

So, again Mr. Chairman, I commend you and the Subcommittee for holding this hearing, and allowing me to testify today. We must remember, Mr. Chairman, that children do not understand politics or embargoes. But children do feel suffering -- they do feel pain. I'll say again that the Cuban people's suffering is not our fault, but I think the United States has a responsibility not to make things worse. We have that responsibility all over the globe. I've met the Cuban people, sat down in their homes with them, and listened to their concerns -- I know they deserve at least that much from us.

Mr. Chairman, our Cuba policy is 38 years old and it just hasn't worked. In fact, it's a complete failure. If our policy was a fortune 500 company, it would have been bankrupt years ago. No one in this room can honestly say we're hurting Castro -- he's certainly not starving. I believe it's time for a change. I look forward to working with you and our colleagues in the Congress to bring about change in Cuba, and to create a policy that finally makes a difference in Cuba where it matters -- with the people.

Thank You.