

the interreligious foundation for community organization

402 west 145th street, new york, ny 10031 212/926-5757 fax: 212/926-5842

Dear Senator/Representative:

On January 31 and February 17, nearly 400 donated medical computers destined for Cuba were seized from our most recent Pastors for Peace caravan by the US Treasury Department. On Ash Wednesday, five of us, citizens of the US and Canada, consecrated a "fast for life" as a call for a more humane US policy toward Cuba. We plan to continue the fast until the 400 medical computers are released.

Cuban churches have requested these computers for use as user terminals in the INFOMED medical information network. INFOMED, sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization and the United Nations Fund for Development, will improve the quality of patient care in Cuban family clinics and hospitals. This life-giving network will help doctors locate essential medications, learn new treatment techniques, and receive consultation from medical specialists. These computers are clearly humanitarian aid for a strictly humanitarian use. Cuban churches, ecumenical organizations, and Christian doctors have specifically requested them. As Cuban Rev. Clara Rodés said, "Our nation's emphasis on health care is something of value to people of faith: Jesus preached the Word, but He also healed the sick."

We are writing to urge you to take the following actions:

- 1) do everything in your power to stop the Helms/Burton bill from becoming law; and
- 2) add your signature to the Dear Colleague letter asking for the release of the 400 medical computers; contact Reps. Dellums (aide Ying Lee) or Woolsey (Theodora Gray).

We are here on the San Diego/Mexico border to give a prayerful testimony about the US blockade of Cuba, a vengeful and brutal aspect of our nation's foreign policy. In contrast to the recent escalation of aggression against Cuba in this past week, we are continuing to bear witness to the need for humane and peaceful solutions to an outdated conflict. We mourn the loss of life in last weekend's events. We also support the right of sovereign nations to self defense, and we urge the US government to stop condoning and abetting the harassment of Cuba. We hope you will speak out in this regard.

We understand that the atmosphere of hostility and hysteria following the events of February 24 make the context of our fast more complicated. We would like to share our views on the events of 2/24:

1) A SINGLE WELL-TIMED ACT OF PROVOCATION HAS PUT THE ISSUE OF CUBA RIGHT BACK INTO THE CENTER OF WASHINGTON POLITICAL DEBATE. In this new context, the Helms/Burton bill is being rushed to a vote in Congress. It is clear that the majority of the Senate considers the bill excessive, unenforceable, and an affront to both the US business community and our international trading partners. We fear that Congress will likely pass the bill anyway, given the current climate in Washington. The newly-strengthened version of the bill will make the US blockade of Cuba even harder to lift. We pray that the bill will be defeated, and we urge all possible work to this end.

2) **WE DO NOT CONSIDER BROTHERS TO THE RESCUE A "HUMANITARIAN" ORGANIZATION.** It was founded in the office of the notorious Cuban American National Foundation. It is directed by an "ex"-CIA agent who was involved in the Day of Pigs invasion and the contra war in Nicaragua. Along with Radio Marti propaganda, it helped to stimulate the exodus of thousands of rafters who risked (and often lost) their lives to leave Cuba.

3) **THE FLYOVER ON FEBRUARY 24 WAS JUST ONE IN A SERIES OF 1700 VIOLATIONS OF CUBAN TERRITORY BY BROTHERS TO THE RESCUE.** Their flights have been part of a tradition of hostile penetration of Cuban territory by Florida mercenaries that goes back 33 years. In 1971, a Cessna flew over Havana scattering grenades that killed eight people. Cessnas from Miami have sprayed phosphorus on sugar fields; bombed sugar cane mills and tourist hotels; dropped off weapons, explosives, and infiltrators on Cuban territory; scattered leaflets urging people to rise up against their government; buzzed parks and residential neighborhoods to intimidate common citizens. All these attacks were carried out by mercenary Cessnas, not by military planes. Every attack on Cuba since the Day of Pigs has been made by so-called "civilian" vehicles

Cuba has submitted reports on 25 specific incursions from Florida into Cuban territory in the last 20 months. These have been reported through all appropriate diplomatic channels, to both the US government and the International Civil Aeronautics Agency. The US government has been well aware that planes from Florida have been violating US aviation regulations and international laws. But nothing has been done to stop or sanction the violators. Our government has a responsibility not to harbor terrorists. But Brothers to the Rescue is still being allowed to operate from the US -- even though it has repeatedly broken national and international laws and regulations.

Up until now, Cuba has reacted to these repeated violations with restraint. The incursions have continued and increased. Cuba might well have assumed that the US was tolerating and abetting an escalation of terrorism, since nothing was being done to stop it.

The Brothers to the Rescue pilots chose to ignore repeated warnings -- not only that they were in Cuban airspace, but that they were flying over a restricted military zone. (Public records show that a military airport and a naval base are in the area. How many times would a foreign and hostile Cessna be allowed to fly over a US military base?)

4) **BLAMING THE VICTIM.** According to international law, any nation whose territory is violated has the right to self-defense -- in the same way that an individual has the right to say no to a molester. We are not unconditionally defending Cuba's actions on 2/24, and we deeply regret the loss of lives. But we feel strongly that if Brothers to the Rescue had not violated international law on 2/24, pilots' lives would not have been lost. If there were no US economic blockade of Cuba, then there would be no pretext for provocations like this one on 2/24 to have happened.

The US is not at war with Cuba. US citizens are not well served by letting our foreign policy be dictated by the special interests of a small number of self-interested provocateurs in Miami.

Matthew 17:21 says that there are some kinds of evil that only come out by prayer and fasting.

We are deeply conscious of the suffering which has been inflicted on 11 million Cuban neighbors by our government's mean-spirited embargo. We are fasting today on their behalf. Congregations and communities around our country are beginning to join us in vigils of prayer, reflection, and fasting.

We are praying for reason in Washington; we are asking our leaders not to be consumed by this new wave of vengeance. We are pleading with our nation to have a heart; we are praying for redemption of our nation's soul. We are asking for an end to this policy of death-in-the-name-of-democracy.

We urge you to defeat Helms/Burton, and to ask Treasury to release the medical computers for Cuba.

Sincerely,

Rev. Lucius Walker, Jr

CONTACT:

Executive Director, IFCCO

(619) 418-3069 (pager)

FOR MORE INFORMATION,

Ellen Bernstein, IFCCO