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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN CUBA

ISSUE

Cuban human rights performance remains quite mixed and is of serious concern to the Canadian government. While the release of several dissidents and other steps taken last spring were positive developments, the overall situation, particularly as regards civil and political rights, falls well short of international standards.

BACKGROUND

On the positive side, the Cuban government has done much to protect social and cultural rights, including those of women and children. While opponents of the government and prisoners (both criminal and political) are occasionally subjected to rough or degrading treatment, there are no instances of atrocities, summary executions or forced disappearances. There is no pattern of torture.

Economic rights exist in principle, although they increasingly are limited in practice by the critical state of the Cuban economy. The sharp contraction of the economy following the loss of support from the former Soviet Union continues to cause economic hardship to Cubans and is undermining the social infrastructure built up over thirty years. Still, Cubans largely continue to enjoy one of the more accessible and effective systems of health, education and social security in Latin America and the developing world. Although recent economic policy reforms have introduced a degree of liberalization and market orientation into the centrally planned economy, their impact and their capacity to preserve the social gains of the Revolution have yet to be measured.

Although all forms of discrimination are prohibited under the Cuban constitution, there is evidence of bias against persons of African descent, whose level of education and economic position compare poorly with other groups. Persons with HIV are required to live in special camps, separate from the rest of Cuban society. At the same time, treatment in the camps appears to be humane.

The main area of concern continues to be civil and political rights, and the judicial process. Restrictions on these rights remain codified in the penal code. The central role given to the Communist Party in the Constitution also gives that body the power to define the parameters of acceptable thought and expression. These parameters occasionally shift, and a degree of criticism is sometimes tolerated, but outright opposition to the fundamental principles of the Revolution and the role of the Party is not permitted.

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