

U.N. Condemns U.S. Embargo Of Cuba

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The United Nations 192-member General Assembly voted overwhelmingly — 185-3 with two abstentions — Wednesday morning to condemn Washington’s economic, commercial and financial embargo against Cuba. The “no” votes were cast by the United States, Israel and Palau. Micronesia and the Marshall Islands abstained.

This is the 17th year in a row that the world community has come out against the unilateral sanctions that Cuba says has caused the island over \$93 billion in direct economic damage from its inception until the end of 2007. Last year’s vote was 184-4 with one abstention. The resolution is non-binding and has been consistently ignored by the United States.

It was the administration of President John F. Kennedy that implemented the full embargo, always referred to in Cuba as “the blockade” on Feb. 7, 1962.

Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, the last speaker before the U.N. vote, told the General Assembly that it will be up to the next U.S. president “to admit” if the embargo is “a failed policy.” Nevertheless, he reiterated that the United States “shall never bring the Cuban people to their knees.”

He refers to the embargo “the main obstacle to Cuba’s development” and specifically to U.S. trade sanctions as the biggest obstacle to Cuba’s recovery from hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which caused an estimated \$5 billion to \$8 billion worth of damage to the island, wiping out food crops and destroying the homes of around half a million people.

Perez Roque has also complained of the “irrational persecution against North American companies, banks and citizens and those of third countries” doing business with Cuba. An official of Cuba’s Ministry of Foreign Investment charged last week that the trade embargo has cost Cuba around \$230 million a year in lost foreign investments.

In a speech earlier this month in Coral Gables, Fla., which has a large Cuban-American population, President Bush justified the embargo, blasting the island as a “dungeon” and promising not to lift the embargo or relax restrictions until the Castro regime releases all political prisoners. The Bush administration has kept Cuba on the list of terrorist countries and has tried to isolate the island and promote regime change.

There are shades of difference between presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama’s stances on Cuba. McCain has said that restrictions could be eased once Washington is “confident that the transition to a free and open democracy is being made.” Obama has come out for easing restrictions on family-related travel and on the amount of money Cuban-Americans want to send to their relatives on the island. He also said he was open to meeting Cuba’s new President Raul Castro without preconditions but said the

embargo should stay in place until Havana “begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change.”

Commenting on Wednesday’s General Assembly vote, Sarah Stephens, director of the Center for Democracy in the Americas, issued a statement saying, “Six days before the presidential election, the world voted on our Cuba policy and we lost in landslide,” adding, “The next U.S. president should break from the past.”

Stephens, author of a forthcoming report: “9 Ways for U.S. to talk to Cuba and for Cuba to talk to U.S.” argues for, “a new Cuba policy that legalizes travel and trade and engages the Cuban government in ways that serve our country’s national interest and advance our country’s image abroad.”

Conventional wisdom has been that no candidate can win the presidential election without winning Florida, where Republican candidates’ staunch anti-Castro position has rallied voters in the past and where a corps of wealthy Cuban-Americans has bankrolled their campaigns. But that situation has apparently been changing, according to recent polls. The state’s Hispanic population has become more diverse and younger Cuban-Americans are more concerned with issues that affect their lives in the United States rather than freedom for their parents’ homeland.

“You are in for a big surprise in Florida,” says Joe Perez, a Cuban-American who has lived in the United States since 1955. Perez is CEO of J Perez Associates, an outdoor advertising company based in California but with a branch in Miami.

“Cuban-Americans in Miami have changed because they are facing reality. Even among the older population every day issues have more importance than the Cuba issue,” he says, referring to the economic crisis and rash of foreclosures that is sweeping South Florida.

The current campaign being waged by Miami’s three Democratic Congressional candidates reflects these changing concerns. Instead of railing against Fidel and Raul Castro, they are talking about hard economic issues as they try to unseat the virulently anti-Castro Republican incumbents, two of whom — Mario and Lincoln Diaz-Balart — are nephews of the elder Castro, whose first wife was their aunt Mirta Diaz-Balart.

Perez is echoed by Silvia Wilhelm, executive director of the Miami-based Cuban American Commission for Family Rights. “Miami has evolved to where the vast majority of Cuban Americans do not support violence...they’re for engagement, family visits, remittances and respectful dialogue,” she says.

Wilhelm has been active in trying to overturn the restrictions tightened in June 2004 by the Bush administration, which require Cuban Americans to seek a special license to visit immediate family members on the island, limits their visits to once every three years; and limits the amount of money they can send to their cash-strapped relatives to \$300 every quarter.

It also defined immediate family members as spouses, children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents or siblings. It’s a definition that clashes with Cuban culture, in which the extended family plays a major role in daily life. Aunts, uncles or cousins, sometimes even neighbors often play a prime role in child-raising.

Both Perez and Wilhelm support Obama and Wilhelm supports the Democratic challengers in

the Florida congressional race.

The Cuban Government has accused both U.S. presidential candidates of engaging in the same old rhetoric about Cuba, noting that neither has said they would lift the embargo.

But ordinary Cubans such as documentary filmmaker Lisette Vila hope that the newly elected president will heed the U.N. resolution.

“I hope there will be a more balanced approach and a change in the policy that the United States has maintained toward Cuba until now,” Vila said. “And I’m speaking about Obama, because I don’t expect anything from the other candidate.”

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