

Tuesday, June 29th, 2010

By Tom Rooney

Special to [The Daily Caller](#)

As the House Agriculture Committee prepares to vote Wednesday on a bill that would lift the travel ban on Cuba bolster the Castro regime with American tourism dollars, I remember the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote about the horrors of living in a Soviet gulag. Solzhenitsyn noted, “We are slaves there from birth, but we are striving for freedom. You, however, were born free. If so, then why do you help our slave owners?”

According to a 2008 State Department report, Castro’s regime was holding at least 205 political prisoners at the end of that year, and as many as 5,000 citizens served sentences without ever being charged with a specific crime. Just a few months ago, political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo died after an 86-day hunger strike. And today, American citizen Alan Gross is being held prisoner without charges for his efforts to help the Cuban people use the Internet.

Unfortunately, the bill before the Agriculture Committee, on which I serve, would lift the travel ban on Cuba without any human rights concessions. The bill would open up relations with a regime that routinely imprisons journalists and citizens who disagree with their government. This would send mixed messages about our commitment to the brave pro-democracy movement in Cuba.

Lifting the travel ban would inject millions of dollars into the Cuban government at a time when the Castro regime is on the ropes. Cuba’s foreign trade declined by a third in the last year, the country is several billion dollars in debt to sovereign lenders, and its economic crisis is putting Castro’s rule in jeopardy.

Why would we lift the travel ban and let American tourism dollars prop up the Castro regime? At this juncture, lifting the ban would amount to yet another bailout – only this time, we’d be bailing out a brutal dictatorship on the brink of collapsing.

Every dollar spent by American tourists in Cuba would contribute to the regime's bottom line, providing resources for Castro's army, his secret police and his political prisons. The State Department lists Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism and reports that the regime not only has close ties with Iran and North Korea, it also provides safe haven for terrorists from around the world. Opening Cuba to travel would jeopardize national security by allowing American tourism dollars to finance state-sponsored terror and help provide refuge to terrorists.

The bill's supporters argue that allowing American tourists into Cuba would weaken the regime. They fail to note that European, Canadian and Latin American visitors have been visiting the island regularly since the 1990s, and that has done nothing to undermine Castro or improve the lives of Cuban people.

To the contrary, Castro has used his control over the tourism industry to create a national system of apartheid and segregation. Cuban citizens cannot enter the hotels, resorts, beaches, restaurants and stores where foreign tourists visit. Tourists have very limited interactions with the Cuban people. The State department warns that any interaction with a Cuban could be monitored by the secret police and can subject that Cuban to harassment, detention or other repressive actions. The Castro-run tourism industry also openly promotes child prostitution, a horrible abuse heaped on Cuba's children.

No wonder that the influx of European and Canadian tourists has not brought greater freedom to Cuba – the tourism industry has become a tool for the Castro regime to expand its control over the Cuban people.

Liberalizing our travel policies with Cuba would fare no better than efforts by Europe or Canada.

We have a choice. We can keep the pressure on the Castro regime and help bring about a post-Castro government that could start anew with us by leaving communism behind. Or we can remove travel restrictions and not only give the Communist party the means to persist, but legitimize their treatment of the Cuban people over the past 60 years.

For nearly a half century the United States stood alone to stare down the Evil Empire and its

spread of communism. We did this not just because communism posed serious threats to our security, as in the case of the Soviet Union, or minimal threats, as in the case of modern day Cuba, but because it is in fact evil. Communism flies squarely in the face of the very liberty and natural rights on which we base our entire existence.

How can anyone honestly say now is the time to ignore all that has happened in Cuba? Let us send a message to the next generation of Cuban leaders after the Castros: they can continue a defeated evil regime, or be welcomed as a free nation with the United States as partner.

*Congressman Tom Rooney represents Florida's 16th district. He is the only member of the Florida delegation serving on either the House or Senate Agriculture Committees.*