

Report from a trip to Cuba of Karel Schwarzenberg and Arnold Vaatz

Period: May 14-19, 2005

Objectives of the trip: To examine the situation of human rights in Cuba and to meet with various representatives of the Cuban democratic opposition, with former political prisoners and wives of present political prisoners. Czech Senator Karel Schwarzenberg (former president of the International Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) and German MP Arnold Vaatz (Deputy Chairperson of the CDU/CSU-Parliamentary Group in the German Bundestag in the fields of work Human Rights and Economic Cooperation) traveled to Cuba on behalf of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba (ICDC). The aim of the journey was to express support to the democratic opposition on the island and to report to other ICDC members about the political and human rights situation in Cuba.

The trip was organized by People in Need/ICDC secretariat. Meetings were planned with representatives of a wide range of Cuban democratic opposition movements. The delegation planned to participate at the Assembly to Promote the Civil Society (Asamblea para promover la Sociedad Civil) held on May 20, 2005. The trip was aborted on May 19 around 6 pm, when Ministry of Interior representatives came to the delegates' rooms, seized their passports and air tickets, prohibited any phone calls and ordered them to come to the Immigration Office to explain the objectives of their trip. Eventually, the delegates were brought directly to the airport without interrogation, no reason or explanation was given for the detention and the delegates were denied the right to call their own embassies. From the hotel they were taken straight to the airport and were ordered to take the earliest flight back to Europe with the airlines they traveled with to Cuba.

Conclusions:

1. Since the temporary suspension of the EU sanctions, no prisoner has been released, despite unconditional release being one of the basic requirements of the EU. Based on the testimonies of released political prisoners and of family members of those presently incarcerated, it is obvious that political prisoners remain incarcerated under severe conditions and without sufficient nourishment or medical treatment.
2. Based on personal meetings with the leaders of different opposition movements, both political and non-political, we are convinced that there has been no development made towards democratic pluralism and the respect of human rights in Cuba since the temporarily suspension of the EU sanctions against Cuba.
3. The Cuban opposition has developed into a wide network of organizations with different political or non-political opinions, which promote civil society, democracy and human rights among Cubans. The ICDC delegates have met with several representatives of these organizations (i.e. Civic and Religious Education Centre in Pinar del Río, Independent Libraries project, Ladies in White movement, different political parties) and enthusiastically acknowledge their activities and achievements. Most of these organizations are oppressed by the Cuban government. Nevertheless, their activities are very well targeted and have surprising results despite their lack of resources such as financial means, books and independent information materials. In our opinion, the EU Embassies should reopen their doors to the opposition representatives.