

# Big Distance, Small Difference

**Ivan Pilip**

On January 12 2001, Czech deputy Ivan Pilip and former student activist Jan Bubenik were arrested and jailed for almost a month after meeting with two Cuban dissidents near to Ciego de Avila, Cuba. They were released after diplomatic negotiations, including face-to-face talks in Havana between Fidel Castro and Czech Senate chairman Petr Pithart.

On behalf of all the people who support democracy, who love democracy, I am proud that Prague was chosen to host the ICDC Summit in September as for over forty years the Czech Republic was in a similar situation to that of Cuba today. Despite the geographical distance, what is going on in Cuba is important because Cuba is a very close country from a cultural and human perspective. We know and have experienced very well the problems the country faces, which is why I believe we should do something so that the situation there changes. That is why I would like to thank the People in Need organization for all it has done. In my opinion, it combines two very significant things: it tries to support the inhabitants of the Island, because whatever our political efforts for change may be, all change must have its source amongst the people who live there. That is extremely important but extremely difficult at the same time. Foundations like People in Need and others such as the Center for a Free Cuba are trying to help the Cuban people and to make them see that that they are not forgotten, which, for the people living in Cuba, is essential.

Many people are in prison in Cuba. I was only arrested for twenty-five days, which is nothing compared to people who have had more substantial experience with the Castro regime. However, today they know that they are not forgotten which helps them a lot. Another very important issue, one for which I am very thankful again to People in Need, are its political activities which put pressure on the present political structure to try and change the situation in Cuba.

I believe that still today the history of Cuba remains, in the eyes of many people, a history of revolutionary heroes. A new movie about Che Guevara will be released soon; a movie about Fidel Castro might be shot in the future claiming that all this was all very romantic. Do we have to keep repeating that it was not romantic at all?! It is a dictatorship and it always has been, ever since the beginning. What we need is to do everything possible to fight it and to put an end to it.

Finally, I would like to say that the struggle is not going to end as soon as the dictatorship is over, as afterwards difficulties will arise. The world needs to think about the future of Cuba, about what we can do from the outside so that the coming changes take place peacefully and so that mistakes that we have made, for example during the transition in the post-communist countries in Central Europe, are avoided. We must think and prepare so that future changes in Cuba are permanent, and so that new and smaller Castros do not appear in the future.