

# Hopes of a Successful Contra Revolutionary

**Jan Bubeník**

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.

When I returned from Cuba, I met with Tomáš Pojar (Executive Director, People in Need Foundation) and we began to talk about the problems that had taken place on my and Pilip's trip. I learnt how People in Need are carrying out similar activities in Cuba much more effectively than we did, delivering assistance effectively to those families desperately in need and those people courageously standing against Castro on the island. Whilst discussing what further activities could be carried out, I believe that we conceived over a beer the idea of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba. I have to congratulate Tomáš and his organization for not only putting together the Committee and convincing such international politicians to stand up for Cuba and human rights, but also for the invisible work they do every day for the people on the island.

I was only in Cuba as a free man for only about three days so I have limited experience and exposure to the island, yet there is one thing I still remember vividly. When we were driving to Ciego de Avila, where we were eventually apprehended, we picked up a few people as hitchhikers and then, not knowing who we were and why we were asking them these questions, we asked them how they felt living in Cuba. Basically every one of them said that in order to better their lives they have to emigrate. One of the gentlemen said that he was too old to emigrate, but he insisted that whether a doctor or a cook, everyone on the island just wanted out of their home country. I was in medical school in 1989 and I remember when very late at night after one particular birthday party, we were talking with some close friends and debating whether we would leave the country once we graduated and would be unable to see our families again. I am incredibly happy to be here and not to have had that kind of dilemma and decision to make for fifteen years. When the Velvet Revolution happened it was an incredibly satisfying moment in my life when I could contribute something to the transformation of my own country from a communist regime to a multiparty democracy and free market. Sometimes there has been incredibly frustrating moments but it has still been incredibly gratifying.

Some people ask me why we went to Cuba, and why we did something so stupid. I always answer with two words: shared hope. That is to say, a shared hope that something that happened to us will happen to the people in Cuba. Those of you that are involved in the process on the island will have the chance to go home and do what we have had the chance to do here. It's also important to those people with the courage to openly stand against Castro's regime that they have international support, both politically and personally. Of particular importance, I think, is the fact that they have people coming directly to their houses, and letting them know that the world has not forgotten about them.

It was incredible *deja-vu* to be in prison, and to be told that the authorities didn't really care about any rule of law, that they would do with us whatever they saw fit and that they would use us as a deterrent to other people that would dare to come to Cuba and meet with dissidents and their families. "It's people like you!" they told me. When I asked what they meant by that, they replied that I was the "living example of a successful contra revolutionary." This was the best name they called me during those interrogations and a name that I wear proudly.