



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

Finance

SENATOR CHUCK GRASSLEY, OF IOWA - CHAIRMAN

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Opening Statement of Sen. Chuck Grassley
U.S. Senate Finance Committee Hearing on U.S.-Cuba Economic Relations
Thursday, September 4, 2003

I'd like to begin by welcoming our witnesses to today's hearing on U.S.-Cuba economic relations. I look forward to listening to their testimony. Today's hearing is on a topic that is currently generating much interest. U.S. economic policies toward Cuba are designed to isolate and weaken the repressive regime of Fidel Castro. Some in the Senate now question these policies. They point out that, despite four decades of sanctions against his government, Castro remains in power. They also contend that U.S. farmers and businesses are losing trade opportunities in Cuba to their counterparts in other countries.

Other senators believe that now is not the proper time to change U.S. trade policies. After all, Castro's repressive government still controls Cuba and, notably, human rights abuses in Cuba have become even more egregious during the past year. These senators contend that lifting trade restrictions will in effect reward Castro for his actions. Support for easing restrictions on trade is pronounced in the U.S. agricultural community. Cuba is welcomed as a new export market for U.S. agricultural products. As a senator from Iowa, I understand these views, and over the years I've backed efforts to lift restrictions on the export of farm goods to Cuba. For example, I supported a provision in the agricultural appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2001 that permits the sale of agricultural goods and medical supplies to Cuba. I also backed a provision in the Senate's 2002 farm bill to repeal the prohibition against U.S. private financing of agricultural sales to Cuba. At the same time that I've worked to expand trade with Cuba, I've advocated continued pressure on Castro's regime for democratic change.

While I favor easing restrictions on agricultural exports to Cuba, I admit that I have questions as to just how much U.S. farmers and ranchers will actually benefit from trade with that country. It's my understanding that Cuba is not always a good customer. I look forward to comments from the witnesses that will address this issue. Moreover, while I'm in general convinced that expanded trade – and especially agricultural trade – will benefit both the American and Cuban people, the current political situation in Cuba greatly complicates efforts to reach this goal. Castro's brutal disregard for democracy and human rights was clearly demonstrated again this year. Beginning in April, some 75 Cuban advocates for freedom were arrested, subjected to summary trials, and sentenced to prison. Amnesty International characterized this year's crackdown as the worst since the early days of Castro's regime. In addition, following a summary trial, three Cubans were executed in April for commandeering a ferry in an attempt to reach the United States.

The Senate acted quickly to condemn Castro's human rights abuses. Yet the question remains as to whether U.S. economic restrictions should be further eased at this time. Undoubtedly, Castro's repressive measures of the past few months will influence discussions here in Congress on this subject. I'm hopeful that today's hearing will make a useful contribution to these debates.