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News / World

## U.S. gives Cuba cold shoulder over prisoners and their suffering families

Fates of jailed Cuban Five are at the heart of hostility between Washington and Havana. Cuban Adriana Perez hasn't seen her imprisoned husband since 1990s.

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JOSE GOITIA / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

The Cuban Five, who were convicted in Miami of espionage, are portrayed on a billboard near Havana as then Cuban president Fidel Castro delivers a speech, in this photo from June 23, 2001.

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By: **Oakland Ross** Feature Writer, Published on Sat Apr 27 2013

She's 43 years old, childless, and lives in Cuba, while her husband of a quarter-century is incarcerated in a U.S. maximum-security prison, having served just 14 years of a soul-crushing sentence — two life terms plus 15 years.

So what are the odds that Adriana Perez and her spouse, Gerardo Hernandez, will ever have a child together?

Right now, those chances are looking extremely slim.

Or, as Perez put it just the other day: "It's another one of our rights that is being violated."

In this case, the right to bear children.

An intense, somewhat diminutive woman with dark, striking features and a crown of wavy black hair, the Cuban activist was in town last week to address an assembly of about 160 mostly left-leaning Torontonians. They crowded into the United Steelworkers Hall at 25 Cecil St. to hear a tale of American hard-heartedness and duplicity, at least as it's framed by one of its victims.

Perez's husband belongs to a group of convicted men who are now widely known as the Cuban Five, men long regarded as national heroes in Cuba, their pictures splashed across billboards, posters, TV screens and car bumpers.

In the United States, however, the same individuals are vilified as foreign spies, criminals who broke the law and who richly deserve to be behind bars.

Behold the core configuration of Cuba-U.S. relations in the early years of the third millennium: a tale of five Cuban convicts — plus one *yanqui* detainee.

The gringo in this story is a 63-year-old American by the name of Alan Gross, who is currently doing time in a Cuban jail.

Put them together, and what you've got is possibly the main obstacle to progress on what may well be the most bizarrely dysfunctional bilateral relationship in the world, a state of bitter enmity that has alternately fumed and flared for more than 50 years, pitting Washington and Havana in what some regard as the final battleground of the Cold War.

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The Cold War, of course, is over — and ideological disagreement no longer has much to do with the stubborn antipathy that continues to dominate U.S.-Cuba relations.

Even the experts seem stymied by the remarkable and seemingly illogical persistence of the dispute.

"There is no explanation," says Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a Washington-based think-tank. "This is the war without end — the war against Cuba."

To some degree, that war can now be reduced to a conflict over prisoners — five Cubans and one American.

Where the Cubans are concerned, time is fast running out.

"The real fear is that the United States is essentially destroying the prospects of these families to have children," says Birns. "The inability to have children confronts all of them."

It is certainly staring Adriana Perez straight in the face, as she travels the world trying to drum up support for her husband and his four comrades.

In fact, her hopes for children may already be moot.

Here's the story so far.

Dispatched to south Florida in the 1990s, the five Cuban men were on a long-term clandestine mission — no one denies that — but they were not spies in the conventional sense, according to their defenders. They were not interested in undermining the U.S. government or its institutions. Instead, they spent their time monitoring the activities of radical Cuban-American groups fiercely opposed to the government of Fidel Castro and not averse to violence.

Later, Havana offered to share its intelligence with the U.S. government.

That was a mistake.

Instead of saying *gracias, compañeros*, American authorities responded by arresting the five Cubans and charging them with a raft of espionage-related crimes.

Lawyers for the five sought to move the trial out of Miami, with its volatile anti-Castro community, but those efforts were rebuffed.

"That was quite shocking," says Birns. "In south Florida, it's hard to imagine you could get an impartial jury."

Impartial or not, the Miami jurors subsequently convicted the defendants on all counts, and the men were sentenced in 2001 to sometimes astoundingly long prison terms, most notably the sentence meted out to the husband of Adriana Perez.

With one exception — Rene Gonzalez, who was released from a federal prison in 2011 but is still serving three years of parole — the Cubans have remained behind bars ever since.

"In spite of this, they have not lost their optimism that they will return to Cuba," said Perez, who hasn't seen her husband since the 1990s — and not for lack of trying.

On at least 10 occasions, she has sought a U.S. visa in order to visit Hernández in jail, only to be turned down each time.

This past week, she called on a highly sympathetic Toronto audience to step up their efforts to win the release of the five.

"I ask each one of you, when you leave here, to think, 'What would I do if it was my son or brother or father who was in jail?'" she said. U.S. President Barack Obama "is not going to give freedom to the five spontaneously or because he is a good person."

What's needed, she said, is political pressure.

That pressure could take many different forms, but it seems unlikely they will include a prisoner exchange, although the Cubans have earnestly sought one.

Cue Alan Gross, a possibly somewhat naive American who was arrested in Havana in 2009, while working on a "pro-democracy" project funded by the United States Agency for International Development, a contract that involved providing electronic communications equipment to the island's minuscule Jewish community.

For that activity, the Cubans arrested the American and put him on trial. He is now serving a 15-year sentence for crimes against the Cuban state.

Havana has left no doubt that it would agree to a swap — Gross's freedom in return for the release of some or all of the five. But Washington says no.

"The U.S. position is these are not comparable detainees," says Christopher Sabatini, policy director at the Council of the Americas, a research and analysis forum based in New York. "I don't think the United States is going to budge on this."

As a result, the two neighbours remain suspended in the same state of mutual hostility and diplomatic paralysis that has prevailed for almost as long as Cuba has been governed by someone named Castro.

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Nowadays, the man in charge in Havana is [Raul](#) Castro, Fidel's slightly younger brother and a considerably more pragmatic individual than his elder sibling ever was.

By most accounts, Raul badly wants to ease tensions with Washington — for economic reasons, above all, given the dilapidated state of the island's economy. But his government also seems deeply committed to securing the release of the Cuban Five.

"They have tried every conceivable measure to show they are conciliatory," says Birns in Washington. "They are giving away the store in terms of the concessions they are granting. You would think that Washington would want to dance around the maypole."

Instead, the Obama administration continues to include Cuba on its list of "terrorist" states — a tired anachronism at best — and to maintain its long-running economic embargo against the island.

"We're in a complete stalemate," says Sabatini.

It sometimes seems that nothing short of the Second Coming could inspire a change in the official U.S. stance on Cuba.

Consider the recent appointment of John Kerry as U.S. secretary of state. Many observers expected the former Democratic presidential candidate to provide a fresh new look to Washington's outmoded policy toward the island. After all, he has long advocated a range of measures that would reduce tensions between the two sides. So far, however, there is little sign that Kerry is sparing much time pondering the fate either of the Cuban Five or of the remaining 11 million islanders still sweltering in the Antillean sea breeze roughly 100 kilometres across the Straits of Florida from Key West.

"That's the shameful of it," says Birns. "This is the great curse. It's an unvisited policy."

According to Sabatini, Cuba receives little attention from the State Department in Washington at least partly because the U.S. has far bigger foreign-policy concerns, from North Korea to China to the Middle East.

Besides, he says, improved relations with the island would spell only minor economic and political benefits for the United States, while risking a much more formidable downside — the outrage of Cuban-Americans in south Florida.

"The amount of noise they would cause is huge," he says. "So why do it?"

In the absence of a clear directive from the White House, he believes it is inevitable that Cuba policy will remain mired in bureaucratic inertia and outdated thinking.

After all, the U.S. Senate's foreign affairs committee is chaired by Bob Menendez, a retrograde Cuban-American who would not look fondly on ambassadorial candidates with a history of progressive-minded ideas about his ancestral island home.

"The problem is that, for career people in Washington, being behind a Cuba change is a death sentence," says Sabatini. "They want to be ambassadors. They'd never be approved."

Still, there may be at least a glimmer of change on the short-term horizon, as Obama prepares to travel to the region next month, a trip that will include stops in Mexico and Costa Rica.

The United States is now the only country in the Americas that does not have normal diplomatic relations with Havana, and Latin American leaders are impatient with what they see as U.S. foot-dragging.

That frustration might be enough to produce a shift in Washington's tone, if not something more concrete.

"There are rumblings of change," says Sabatini. "But it will have to come from the White House."

Meanwhile, Adriana Perez continues to traverse the globe, on an increasingly urgent campaign to secure the release of her husband.

"We hope it comes soon," she said in Toronto last Saturday, "because it's already too late."

*For more about Cuba — the good, the not-so-good, and the downright glorious — check out Oakland Ross's eRead, [Cuba Libre](#). Simply go to [stardispatches.com](#) and subscribe for \$1/week. [Cuba Libre](#) is also available for single-copy purchase at [itunes.ca](#) or [starstore.ca](#) for \$2.99.*



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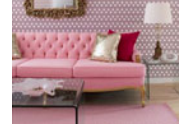
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