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DISASTER IN CUBA

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Abstract

The article offers a criticism of the point of view that other countries should emulate disaster programs in Cuba as well as that the removal of Mr. Castro from power will bring about a failed state system that will precipitate a complex humanitarian emergency in which the United States government would coordinate the response of the international community. It outlines Cuba's disaster practices, the possibility of famine, and non-governmental organizations working in Cuba as important harbingers of civil society.

Disaster in Cuba

The Cuban state has a very effective system of social controls (Aguirre, 2002) that it uses to organize the behavior of masses of people in various efforts, to include, among others, conventionalized political rallies and other forms of collective behavior (Aguirre, 1984), the structuring of mass migration (Aguirre, 1994; Aguirre, Saenz and James, 1997), the activities of education and other institutions (Aguirre and Vichot, 1998; Aguirre, 2002a; 2002b), and improving the health of the population through mass vaccination and other campaigns. It should not be surprising that such a system of social organization and control is also very effective in providing certain types of disaster preparedness and response services to the population. Cuba's disaster preparedness is centered on highly professionalized and effective meteorological services and warning systems (Lezcano, 1995; Sims and Vogelmann, 2002, 395-398), and on educational efforts that alert people of impending tropical storms and hurricanes and that tells them what to expect and what they should do in the short term to prepare for the impact of these hazards. The customary structuring of the lives of people through the activities of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and other mass organizations of the state provide ready access for official disaster programs to the neighborhood, places of work, and other areas (Aguirre, 1984). This structuring at times of impending disasters facilitates the transmission to and the knowledge by threatened populations of the warnings and other protective instructions that are given by the authorities, as well as the enforcement of evacuation advisories. Evacuations are used very effectively by the

Cuban state to move people from areas expected or exposed to high winds, flooding, and sea surges. Seldom such measures involve the forced movement of people, even though in Cuba the authorities have the right to compel evacuations, which is not the case in the United States and other countries.

Certain types of post-disaster response tasks such as the clearing of falling trees obstructing roads, and the removal of other debris, are usually accomplished very promptly, as is the restoration of lifeline services of electricity, water, and other essentials to the population. These tasks involve the activation of people who are pressed into service or who volunteer, and the repositioning of resources that are usually already available to the various bureaucracies of the state.

Reconstruction efforts are usually quite efficient in the case of hospitals, schools, electric generating plants, and other critical facilities. Housing reconstruction however, is very deficient, and despite claims to the contrary, is not carried out in any systematic way (Kapur and Smith, 2002). The Cuban state has shown a long term and chronic inability to satisfy the demand for housing of the population and is also incapable of responding in a programmatic and satisfactory way to the destruction of the housing stock that at times is brought about by hurricanes and other storms. The majority of disaster victims whose houses are destroyed or seriously damaged are left to their own devices and the sporadic assistance from international humanitarian programs as well as the few non-governmental organizations operating in Cuba (see below).

There is hardly an awareness, much less programs--with the possible exception of the project funded by the United Nations Development Program to protect, restore, and enhance Havana's central district (La Habana Vieja; Scarpaci, 2000)—of the need to

respond to the problems and promises of long-term community recovery which would involve the affected residents in the planning for and participation in the process of decision making and conflict resolution attending the long term re-building of communities and regions that would make them safer and more sustainable (Natural Hazards Research). Nor are there disaster programs that mitigate the effects of hazards. Thus, there is the near absence in the record of comprehensive and inclusive land use planning, zoning, and building codes as mechanisms for the mitigation of the effects of disasters (to compare to US see Mileti, 1999, chapter 6; Twigg, 2004). A good case in point comes from my hometown of Trinidad, in the south coast of central Cuba, in which the local architect attempted without success to curtail the access of tourist busses and tourists to the historic center of the old city on the grounds that the old buildings were being negatively impacted by the vibration of the heavy vehicles, and that the infrastructure of the city could not handle such a large influx of people. Such concerns were disregarded, and the government, in its rush to encourage tourism now plans to build more hotels in the area to cater to the foreigners (Scarpaci, 2002; for other examples of the absence of mitigation efforts to protect the environment see Portela and Aguirre, 2000).

Importantly, the risk of hurricane is not evenly distributed throughout Cuba. Alvarez (2003) documents that certain areas and cities are more likely to be impacted by these hazards. Some of them are Havana, Nuevitas, Baracoa, Manzanillo, Cienfuegos, and Isle of Youth. Are there mitigation programs going on in these areas to diminish their vulnerability and increase their resilience? Is their recovery from their frequent

experiences with hurricanes following sound principles in urban development so as to make these places more sustainable? There is no indication that this is the case.

Using the established approach in disaster studies to understand the various types of activities associated with sudden disasters, involving the well known concepts of disaster preparedness, response, reconstruction, recovery, and mitigation (Tierney, Lindell, and Perry, 2001), in relative terms the Cuban state has a very poor record in the area of disaster reconstruction, recovery, and mitigation. Its record is much better when it comes to certain features of disaster preparedness and response, in which its control of the population is used much more effectively. It is in light of these findings about the society-disaster link in Cuba that recent efforts to portray Cuba as a model to emulate by the rest of the developing world lack validity.

Model to Emulate

Ben Wisner (2001a; 2001b; see also http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/geography_research/radix/cuba.html) recognizing the above-mentioned achievements writes, “Cuba has lessons for the rest of us.” However, he does not mention the totalitarian social controls that make possible to an undetermined extent the effectiveness of these policies as well as the shortcomings I have indicated. An example of this control comes from a passing remark of a high official of the Cuban government in charge of disaster response who indicated that whenever a hurricane threatens the country, “(t) he Civil Defense authority becomes the supreme authority in the province and all other institutions are subordinated to their direction” (Focus, 2002). This sort of military control by the Civil Defense System, effective as it is (Alvarez, 2003), is inconceivable in pluralist societies with democratic political systems.

The emphasis on democracy, individual freedoms, community participation, devolution of political power to the community, commitment to social equality and justice, and the link that is made between poverty and disaster vulnerability in Mr. Wisner's celebrated book *At Risk* (Blaikie et al., 1994) as well as in other of his writings, cannot be easily reconciled with the searing poverty, the growing and severe malnutrition of the people, and the intractable nature of the political dictatorship of Mr. Castro. The claim that the Cuban model of disaster prevention is exportable ignores the fact that Cuba's limited successes in protecting its citizenry from the immediate impact of sudden disasters occurs in the context of a political system that on other grounds aggravates the vulnerability of its population and that has been rejected by all of the other nations in Latin America at the present time. Still to be determined is the extent to which such programs correspond to integrated warning systems in use in other countries (Nigg, 1995), and what would need to change to make them work in these other contexts.

Advancing Mr. Wisner's arguments, Martha Thompson and Izaskun Gaviria, from Oxfam America (2004), write about "the lessons in risk reduction from Cuba," claiming that Cuba's development model reduces risk and vulnerability because its emphasis on universal access to services, policies to reduce social and economic disparities, investment in human development, government investment in infrastructure, and social and economic organization (16). In their opinion, the most important part of disaster mitigation in Cuba is "the political commitment on the part of the government to safeguard human lives" (22), which is said to create trust between the government and the people during times of emergencies (27). These are rhetorical statements that are easily disproved and that in the absence of empirical evidence and conceptual clarity do

not help elucidate the state of mitigation in Cuba. For example, they praise the legal framework in which the National Civil Defense, part of Cuba's military establishment, is a key player, without recognizing the grave practical limitations of civil defense national disaster programs that eventually were recognized in the United States, Australia, and other parts of the world and resulted in their replacement by civil emergency management systems such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Haddow and Bullock, 2004; Drabek, 2003). They declare that in Cuba there is universal access to government services, without commenting on the disparities in wealth and privilege, the continuing racism (Aguirre and Bonilla Silva, 2002), and the impact of the new dollar economy on social stratification in the country. Finally, perhaps with fine irony (?), they write “**there is no comprehensive substitute for reducing poverty and promoting social and economic equity as the fundamental long-term strategies to reduce vulnerabilities to hazards**” (53, emphasis on the original).

Failed State Scenario

Perplexedly, just as the claims that Cuba represents a case for emulation is flawed, present day thinking in the U.S. federal government on the Cuba-disaster link is also off the mark, for it frames it in terms of the immediate repercussion of the passing of Mr. Castro from political leadership rather than on what works and does not work in Cuba today, why this is the case, and what can be done to strengthen Cuba's disaster relevant policies and programs. A prominent statement of present day thinking is the recently concluded seminar on **Humanitarian Aid for a Democratic Transition in Cuba** published by the Institute of Cuban and Cuban American Studies of the University of Miami with funding from the U. S. Agency for International Development. Writing in the

proceedings of the seminar, Andrew S. Natsios (2004), Administrator of USAID, states that the transition to democracy in Cuba has the potential to eventuate into a “complex humanitarian emergency.” According to Mr. Natsios, there are three scenarios for the transition: a stable democratic transition government, an unstable democratic transition government, and an unstable failed state, with widespread violence, civil war, widespread human right abuses, economic collapse, widespread famine. It is this failed state scenario that presumably will bring about the complex humanitarian emergency feared by Mr. Natsios. In this emergency, as reflected in the subject matter of the other presentations in the seminar, the problems of providing medical assistance, insuring public health, and providing for food security, particularly curtailing the impact of hunger on children and other vulnerable segments of the population, as well as the task of coordinating and directing humanitarian international assistance to the people of Cuba, a subject matter of great import for Mr. Natsios, loom large.

While such worst-case thinking may have its place in hypothetical case studies, nothing in the contemporary history of Cuba lends credence to the failed state argument. Cuba is not Bosnia. The Cuban elite has been in firm control of the Cuban Communist Party, the Cuban Armed Forces, and all other institutions of Cuba for many years now. It is a unified elite and it has prepared for the transition (Aguirre, 2002). It is highly unlikely that it will lose control at a critical time in which the passing of Mr. Castro is certain to generate mass enthusiasms in South Florida and can precipitate aggressive posturing by the US government. A fourth scenario, unacknowledged by Mr. Natsios, is much more likely, namely the continuation of the present day regime after the passing of Mr. Castro from power. Unfortunately, the implications of this fourth scenario for

disaster preparedness and mitigation in Cuba have so far escaped the attention of Washington planners, who in my view should ask themselves what should be the policy of the United States if a catastrophe happens in the absence of political change. Less we think this scenario farfetched, we should remind ourselves of the many millions that died in famines during the long-lasting dictatorships of Mao and Stalin.¹

Disaster Practices

As I have written elsewhere, it is not a political but an economic transition that is taking place in Cuba. Assuming that the present day political system will go on after the passing from the scene of Mr. Castro, it is plausible to also assume that the principles established by the Cuban government at the present time for the handling of the demands created by disaster events will continue into the foreseeable future, and that the Cuban government will be involved in the structuring of humanitarian assistance as it has done until now (see below).

Years ago, the influential UNA-USA Policy Studies Panel on International Disaster Relief report (1977) on the global response to natural disasters argued that the three most serious political problems blocking effective use of foreign aid were: 1. The

¹Disasters are commonly understood as events that overwhelm the response capacity of communities and require assistance from elsewhere in the region and country. They often impact directly first response organizations such as the police and the fire departments, rendering them less capable of serving the impacted populations. In comparison, catastrophic events impact an entire country or countries in multiple and complex ways, requiring international assistance. There are a number of excellent recent monographs on Stalin, among them V. M. Berzhkov, *At Stalin's side : his interpreter's memoirs from the October Revolution to the fall of the dictator's empire*. Secaucus, NJ : Carol Pub. Group, 1994. For Mao, see the account of his doctor, Zhisui Li, *The private life of Chairman Mao : the memoirs of Mao's personal physician*. New York : Random House, 1994.

unwillingness of affected governments to acknowledge that disasters had occurred or recognize their full magnitude, 2. Governments' decisions regarding the distribution of disaster relief, which often was impacted by considerations other than the plight of disaster victims, and 3. Withholding of aid to categories of victims and corruption in disaster relief operations. It argued that the most important problem faced by the international disaster relief system was the absence of appropriate counterpart government organizations capable of responding to the needs of disaster victims and channeling foreign relief aid. Since its issuance, much has changed in the intervening years and yet much remains the same. Instead of unwillingness to recognize disasters, nowadays the tendency of some governments is to use disaster events as triggers to access foreign aid that once obtained is often diverted from the original intention of donor countries and organizations. Most governments nowadays have emergency management institutions to handle foreign aid, but on average the effectiveness of such institutions is quite limited. Mulwanda's (1993) description of Zambia's lack of a national emergency and housing program and policy seems to correspond to the situation of most countries in Latin America; their reality is one of "disjointed incrementalism" in which "the country (ies) are constantly involved in reacting to crisis situations with disjointed programmes whose methods and results are forgotten until the next crisis (p. 75)." Corruption continues, in part due to the absence of accountability (see for example Christie and Hanlon, 2001, 73-80; Tulchin and Espach, 2000).

The history of relations of the Cuban government to international humanitarian organizations does not reflect any of the problems identified in the UNA-USA Policy Studies Panel on International Disaster Relief Report, for the Cubans have developed

their own distinctive approach to disaster aid. As far as I know, cases of corruption in disaster assistance programs have not surfaced. Contrary to many other governments, the Cuban government has not created an agency to handle all forms of foreign humanitarian assistance. Instead, it links donors to specific national government agencies in terms of the theme or topic that the donor agency or government is interested in sponsoring. The favorite donor actors from its perspective are departments or programs of the United Nation (e.g., U.N. Development Program; U.S. Funds for UNICEF), international organizations (e.g., Oxfam America; The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; World Food Program; CARE; Catholic Relief Service; Physicians for Peace; American Friends Service Committee; Church World Services; Global Links; Stop Hunger Now (Noon, 2001), and smaller, non-profit humanitarian organizations (e.g., The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; The Cuban Aid Project of New Jersey) that are allowed into Cuba for specific purposes. Noon (n.d.; see also Dilla and Oxhorn, 2002, 19-23) for a more recent list see Aristiqueta, 2004) provides a very useful chart describing the international organizations that have projects in Cuba related to the following sector activities: agriculture and food security, business development and cooperatives, capacity building, political relations, disaster and emergency relief, education and training, environmental development, gender issues and women in development, health care, rural development, and water and sanitation. She lists five organizations providing disaster related assistance: Church World Services, International Aid, Oxfam America, Stop Hunger Now, and U.S. Funds for UNICEF.

Extensive government-specific programs of humanitarian assistance, such as the Canadian, have not operated for long in the island, for they fall victims to the vagaries of

international political relations, and this sensitivity is particularly true with U.S. government's offerings of humanitarian assistance, which most recently in the case of Hurricane Michelle was refused. It is also the case that in most instances of my knowledge, the Cuban government is willing to recognize both the full magnitude of sudden disasters as well as accept its responsibility to assist the victims of disasters (Oxfam, 2003), although it tries to structure the distribution of disaster and humanitarian assistance in such a way--for example its treatment of CARITAS--so as to dissimulate if not misrepresent the international source of aid, representing such assistance as its own.

Catastrophe

It is reasonable to expect that these broad principles in the handling of disaster aid will continue into the foreseeable future.² In the absence of a military intervention by the

²This description is derived in part from a close reading of material describing Hurricane Michelle of 2001, the most intense hurricane (class 4) to strike Cuba in more than half a century, forcing the evacuation of an estimated 700,000 people and damaging approximately 40,000 homes. Some of these articles are: Focus, June 2002, "What Can We Learn from Cuba About Disaster Prevention? An Interview with Gilberto Quevedo. Basin News, No. 23 (www.gtz.de/basin); Stephanie Kriner, 18 Dec. 2001. "November Storm Leaves Cuba Dependent on Outsiders," Disaster Relief, Worldwide Disaster Aid and Information Via the Internet; Susan Kim, September 20, 2002. How Does Cuba Do It? (www.disasternews.net/news/news.php?articleid=1567); Christina Ward, November 5, 2001. "Hurricane Michelle Hits Cuba." Disaster Relief, Worldwide Disaster Aid and Information Via the Internet (www.disasterrelief.org/Disasters/011104michelle5); Daniel Schweimler, November 12, 2001. "Hurricane Michelle: Assessing the Damage" BBC News; "Cuba and Hurricane Michelle," EcoSur Disaster Prevention (www.ecosur.org/eng/desastres/cuba_michelle.php); "Hurricane Michelle Batters Cuba," BBC News, November 5, 2001; U.S. Cuba Sister Cities Association, 9 November 2001. "Preliminary Report. United Nations Interagency Mission in Response to Hurricane Michelle's Passing Through Cuba" (<http://uscscsca.org/unmichelle.htm>); USCSCA, 9 November 2001. "Hurricane Assessment Team Going to Cuba, 11/27." (<http://uscscsca.org/michelle.htm>); Carlos Lage Davila, "Cuba se recupera de los danos del huracan Michelle." Agencia Informativa Latinoamericana Prensa Latina S.A. (www.prensa-latina.org); Susan Hurlich, Personal Testimony of Michelle's Impact, 10/12, Havana. AfroCubaWeb; Oxfam News, December 4, 2001, "'Hurricane Michelle Batters Cuba-Oxfam Response.'" (www.oxfam.ca/news/Hurricane_Michelle/facts.htm); Cristina

United States, there will be no failed state, and the U.S. federal government will not be in charge of international humanitarian assistance to Cuba in the foreseeable future, say five to ten years after the absence of Mr. Castro from power. Very likely, it will have to come to some understanding with the Cuban government if it would wish to offer humanitarian assistance to the Cuban people in a major emergency, and it will have to contend with the likely collective action of Cubans in the United States trying to assist their kin and friends in Cuba.

Such emergency, in fact, may be at hand. While the occurrence of widespread political instability and violence in my view is very unlikely, one major slow onset catastrophe which is--as we have learned from Eastern Europe and Russia in the post USSR period--the result of misguided development policy and the mismanagement of a centrally controlled economy, could in fact transform the situation drastically, namely the impact of severe soil depletion and environmental collapse on agricultural productivity, which would precipitate widespread famine in the country and would necessitate a very different sort of international aid package, and depending on a number of factors, could in turn force important changes in the system (Driggs, 2003; San Martin, 2004). The evidence for such a developing catastrophe is inconclusive, even if the piecemeal and

Estrada, 16 November 2001, After Michelle--thousands still in Cuban shelters. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, (www.ifrc.org/docs/news/01/11601); Xavier Castellanos, 23 September 2002, "Preparedness saves lives as hurricane hits Cuba" (www.ifrc.org/docs/news/02/092302). I also consulted information available on Hurricanes Isidore and Lili during 2002.

incomplete information we have is very troubling (Ramos, 1997; Portela and Aguirre, 2000). The improvement of our knowledge base in this area is of great importance if we wish to come to some understanding of the likelihood of this catastrophe. Needed is a much better sense of what is happening, perhaps in part derived from detailed scientific analyses using geographic information system platforms and existing high resolution remote sensing technology, to survey the entire country and quantify the present day state of Cuban agriculture. This or some other approach could provide a better understanding available today of the likelihood of this catastrophe, for until now, to borrow from “The Economist” (2002) in a recent analysis of the Cuban economy, “(f)ew people know the true figures for how bad things are, and those who do aren’t telling.”

Civil Society

What would happen in such a catastrophe? My sense is that what is likely to happen is happening, albeit in small scale. Social change is messy, difficult to trace accurately, complex, multidimensional, often imperceptible. The key to the future is to be found in the possibilities of present solutions and failures; partly it is in the emergence of civil society as the mechanism that will bring about a more satisfactory approach to disaster preparedness, response, reconstruction, recovery, and mitigation. However, it is a civil society not as these social formations are at times understood in Europe, the United States, and other developed countries, but as it develops from the unique relationship of the Cuban people with the Cuban state. An effective civil society in Cuba does not imply a necessary antagonism with the state, for as Burchardt (2002) argued, “it is possible for civil society and the state to merge synergistically and provide new legitimacy to the

system,” particularly if its authoritarianism would gradually subside and constitutional guarantees and public administration emerge (70).

At the present time, the most active units in this nascent civil society are the tentative, fragile, negotiated efforts of neighbors to solve their immediate problems and to negotiate with the government for access to resources or for its acquiescence in their search for resources from multiple sources, including non-governmental organizations and international donors. In the context of this ongoing grass root, very often-unorganized efforts, akin to local experiments, a clue to what is happening is presented in Minor Sinclair’s report entitled **NGOs in Cuba: Principles for Cooperation**. Mr. Sinclair is Cuban Program Officer of Oxfam America. He points out that NGOs in Cuba are not substitutes or competitors of the state in the delivery of services, but instead engage the citizenry and the government in development. In Cuba, NGOs are not solving problems that the state abandoned, as in most other countries, but instead are trying to work with communities in supplementing the programs and policies of the state. They neither confront nor acquiesce to the government but rather develop community programs that claim revolutionary values as their own, such as “social justice, compassion, solidarity, and participation” (8), encouraging equity. NGOs work with the government and its ministries rather than opposing or undermining it. From Mr. Sinclair’s perspective, NGOs in Cuba are “laboratories” in which new ideas and innovations are attempted, implement projects in communities that if successful can be replicated elsewhere in the country and at the national level, provide opportunities for participation of people in collective projects to benefit their communities, extend and strengthen

government programs, and encourage and facilitate the self help efforts of committed participants.

Importantly for my purposes is the transformation mentioned in Mr. Sinclair's report brought about by NGOs on the ability of Cubans from all walks of life to learn and borrow experiences and resources from other national experiences, including learning about funding strategies and donor priorities and policies, developing international relations and becoming part of international networks, and being able to travel and learn about the experiences of other people. As he states, to develop humanitarian assistance in Cuba NGOs cannot be independent of the state or in opposition to it, as the U.S. State Department's licensing now requires, but instead they must be partners to the state in improving the standard of living of the Cuban people.

The position sponsored by Mr. Sinclair is unsatisfactory both to the hard line members of the Cuban elite as well as to important segments of public opinion among Cubans abroad opposed to Mr. Castro's government. For the first category of persons, the space he claims for NGOs go against the grain of their state project, for instead of central planning and the primacy of the Cuban Communist Party, NGOs are living proof of state failure. Such space moreover provides organization and voice to the people, recognizing the autonomy and interest of their communities, and encouraging their democratic participation. The Cuban elite's deep distrust of the NGOs and all other units of civil society find expression in Philip Agee's essay (2003). Agee, an influential friend of the regime, writes that civil society is a ploy of the State Department in which "Cuba would be included in a new world wide program to finance and develop non governmental and voluntary organizations, what was to become known as civil society,

within the context of U.S. global neo-liberal policies.”(5). He goes on to write, in truly Manichean and conspiratorial manner, that the CIA will use “these powerful elements of civil society to penetrate, divide, weaken, and destroy corresponding enemy organizations on the left, and indeed to impose regime change by toppling unwanted governments.” (6) He then documents how U.S. federal funding is being distributed to 12 NGOs that in turn give support to their representative groups in Cuba and help them spread their messages throughout the world, and uses this information to justify the recent repression of dissidents in the island as an act of self-preservation by the revolutionary government (for another description of the U.S. government program towards Cuba, see Ranneberger, 1998; USDA, 2002). It is unnecessary to comment on Mr. Agee’s self serving interpretation of the recent wave of repression in Cuba. Rather, it shows the reasoning for the distrust of the NGOs by an important segment of the Cuban elite, even as the Cuban government uses NGOs as a label in its ever present propaganda campaigns, as shown in its thinly disguised attempts to portray its front organizations, such as the Center for the Study of Europe or The Cuban Institute for Friendship Between People, as Cuban NGOs.

For the second category of critics, segments of the Cuban community in exile, Mr. Sinclair’s approach smacks of collaboration with the sworn enemy. Illustrative of the controversies is the opposite reactions of two popular radio stations in Miami to the idea of sending donations to Cuba in the aftermath of a hurricane in 1996. WCMQ told its listeners to withhold donations, for they would only help Mr. Castro’s government, who would steal whatever they sent to assist the victims. The other, WQBA, stressed the suffering of family members and the need to help them during the disaster (Garcia, 1996).

Mr. Sinclair's position also satisfies very few officials in positions of power outside Cuba, either in the European Union, Canada, or the United States. These governments have attempted to bring about the emergence of a pluralistic and democratic system in Cuba and have either disengaged from Cuba when they have failed to encourage such transition, as the case of the European Union and Canada (Canada International Development Agency), or, as in the case of the United States, have supported a confrontational approach.

Contradictory Policies

Prompted in part with dissatisfaction with the relative ineffectiveness of the embargo against Cuba (Spadoni, 2001), in a move presented to the public as designed to bring about what is euphemistically called regime change, the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba constituted by President Bush developed a set of recommendations that came into effect at the end of June 2004. They tightened the embargo considerably. The prohibitions are comprehensive. For example, gifts are limited to food, vitamins, medicine, medical supplies and equipment, and receive-only radio equipment; parcels with items other than food are limited to once per month per household, and the recipients must be a close relatives of the donors; travelers to Cuba can only carry 44 pounds of baggage; it allows only one family trip every three years; students will not be able to travel to Cuba for short courses of less than 10 weeks; U.S. boaters are barred from Cuban waters if they do not have an export license from the U.S. Commerce Department and a license from the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (for reasons for tightening U.S. policy to make the embargo effective and help bring about regime change in Cuba see Lopez, 2000; a broader consideration of the effectiveness of

various engagement policies can be found in Haass and O'Sullivan, 2000; Alexander (2003), advances an alternative to the embargo, what he calls "a smart sanction" approach that would target Mr. Castro).

The permanency of this new federal policy towards Cuba is doubtful. It is bound to change if Mr. Bush is not reelected for a second term. Even if he is re elected, there are important segments of his own party and of the U.S. capitalist class that would like them relaxed. In the short term they create risks that have not been openly acknowledged. They contradict other statements and professed intentions of the U.S. government. Their effective enactment will aggravate the malnutrition and standard of living of some of the most vulnerable segments of the population that on other grounds are those that cause the greatest concern to the U. S. Agency for International Development; they will facilitate the occurrence of the very catastrophe of famine and civil disturbances that presumably we wish to alleviate. They do not spell out what will the U.S. government do in case of widespread civil disturbances in the island. The notion of regime change is dangerous from a public policy perspective since the enactment of an effective embargo will increase suffering in Cuba, both famine and civil disturbances, but does not spell out what happens during and after the suffering, which by itself will not bring about political change. Moreover, they will solidify rather than undermine the legitimacy of the present day government, for ample historical evidence shows that, despite internal dissension and suffering, people when attacked by other nations rally around their leaders. Even as it rallies the country around Mr. Castro the policy divides the Diaspora community, for it appeals to a segment of this community.

If they are successful in worsening economic conditions in Cuba---and they may, for remittances and other types of assistance are the most important source of hard currency for the regime---the Cuban government will do what it has done in the past to survive in power, namely export surplus labor through a mass migration that creates an international crisis that would either obligate the U.S. government on humanitarian grounds to become involved in assisting the émigrés, as in the case of the mass migrations from Camarioca and Mariel (Aguirre, 1994), or that would provide the rationale for a military invasion of the island by US forces. The real question then is whether the United States is pursuing a policy of war against Cuba and if so why. Mr. Castro has said so publicly many times before, but this time, despite the absence of a national consensus in the US about the desirability of this policy, the inability of the Cuban government to attack us, and the absence of a compelling U.S. national interest, he may be right.

It is the rather ethically ambiguous approach of Mr. Sinclair that in fact may bring about social change in Cuba and that could provide mechanisms for the U.S. government to deliver humanitarian assistance in the case of a catastrophe. Mr. Sinclair's approach, also used by CARITAS and other successful NGOs in Cuba, may be one of the only options available right now to help Cubans survive the present day crisis, and in the long term could facilitate the transition to democracy and the rule of law while safeguarding the hopes and values of the Cuban people.

It could also be a way to strengthen in Cuba an international network of organizations that understand international humanitarian assistance work and that could provide continuity and effectiveness to international humanitarian aid efforts, including

that of the U.S. government, in case of a catastrophe such as famine. Unfortunately, present day efforts by our government to strengthen civil society in Cuba are limited to sponsoring NGOs outside of Cuba to assist groups in Cuba. This federal program could be made much more effective if it would also assist NGOs that cooperate with the Cuban government. Moreover, the program should establish much more effective out reach programs to encourage diversity in the organizations that receive federal aid, for as it is nowadays the recipients of this federal funding are more often than not universities and conservative think tanks. For the U.S. government, the Cuba policy should be neither black or white but subtle tones of gray.

Conclusion

The Cuban state has a very poor record in the area of disaster reconstruction, recovery, and mitigation, although its record is much better when it comes to certain features of disaster preparedness and response. The claim that the rest of the developing world should emulate the Cuban model ignores its basis on the totalitarian social control of the population, a political system that also creates important vulnerabilities. Similarly, a failed state framework which is used to predict a complex humanitarian emergency and justify the centrality of the U.S. government in providing assistance to Cuba and structuring international humanitarian aid is equally unsound. Despite frequent claims to that effect, the scientific evidence for the likelihood of catastrophic famine in the near-term is inconclusive, and this lack of information on Cuban agriculture should be remedied through the use of multiple methodologies, including expert opinion surveys and meetings of experts, and existing high resolution remote sensing technology to survey the entire country and quantify agricultural production. If indeed a catastrophe

happens, assuming that the U.S. government will not intervene militarily, there will be an ongoing Cuban government dealing with it, and the best way for the US and other governments wishing to give humanitarian assistance would be through the system of NGOs already established in Cuba that cooperate with the Cuban government in its assistance of the people of Cuba. This system could be used not only to deal with catastrophe but also to strengthen disaster programs in the island. It needs to be done now to help improve the conditions of people's lives in Cuba.

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