

World Report 2024



Cuba

Events of 2023

A boat sits abandoned on the shore on Key West, Florida, after transporting people from Cuba to the United States, January 6, 2023.

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The government continues to repress and punish virtually all forms of dissent and public criticism, as Cubans endure a dire economic crisis affecting their rights.

Hundreds of critics and protesters, including many who took to the streets in July 2021, remain arbitrarily detained. Demonstrations continued in 2023, triggered by blackouts, shortages, and the deterioration of living conditions. Cubans continued to leave the country in unprecedented numbers.

The United States continued a failed policy of isolation towards Cuba, including a decades-long embargo.

Arbitrary Detention and Prosecution

The government continued to employ arbitrary detention to harass and intimidate critics, independent activists, political opponents, and others.

Two years after the July 2021 protests, the largest since the Cuban revolution, rights groups counted over 700 people, including over 70 women, still behind bars in connection with them. Many were periodically held incommunicado. Some suffered ill-treatment and in some cases torture.

The government said over 380 people, including several children, were serving sentences. Some stood trial in military courts, contravening international law. Some stood trial in ordinary courts on “sedition” charges, accused of violence such as rock-throwing and received disproportionate prison terms of up to 25 years. Many received only summary trials on vaguely defined charges such as “public disorder” or “contempt.”

Prosecutors framed as criminal behavior actions such as criticizing the government on social media or protesting peacefully, which are lawful exercises of freedoms of expression and association. Prosecutors and judges used unreliable or uncorroborated evidence.

Migration

Between January 2022 and October 2023, the US Border Patrol apprehended Cubans more than 420,000 times, which may have included multiple encounters with the same people. Many traveled north through Nicaragua, which waived visa requirements for Cubans in late 2021.

Additionally, between October 2022 and July 2023, the US Coast Guard intercepted over 6,800 Cubans at sea.

Many Cubans have also fled to countries other than the US, including in Latin America and Europe.

Travel Restrictions

Since reforms by the Cuban government in 2013, many people previously denied permission to travel to and from Cuba have been able to do so, including human rights defenders and bloggers. However, the reforms give the government broad discretionary power to restrict travel on grounds of “defense and national security” or “other reasons of public interest.”

The government continued to bar critics from boarding planes to visit or return to their own country, in violation of international human rights law.

Economic and Social Rights

The economic crisis in Cuba severely impacts people’s enjoyment of economic and social rights. They endure blackouts and acute shortages of food, medicine, and other basic items. In February, authorities said Cubans should expect three-hour blackouts every day for several months.

In May, the head of the Cuban pharmaceutical industry said authorities were unable to obtain medicines that Cuban people needed. She blamed the US embargo.

Also in May, Cuban authorities reported a decrease in life expectancy, from 78.07 years between 2014 and 2016 to 77.7 years between 2018 and 2020, and an increase in child mortality, from 4.9 deaths per 100,000 born alive in 2020 to 7.5 in 2022.

Political Prisoners

Cuba was holding over 1,000 people, including 34 adolescents and other children, who met the definition of political prisoners, as of November, according to Prisoners Defenders, a Madrid-based

nongovernmental organization (NGO).

Cubans who criticize the government risk criminal prosecution. They are not guaranteed due process, such as the right to fair and public hearings by a competent, independent, and impartial tribunal. In practice, courts are subordinate to the executive branch.

José Daniel Ferrer, leader of the Cuban Patriotic Union, the main opposition party, remained in prison at time of writing. In April 2020, a court in Santiago de Cuba sentenced him to 4.5 years of “restrictions on freedom” for alleged “assault” in a case that the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention deemed arbitrary. On July 11, 2021, officers detained Ferrer as he was heading to a demonstration. In August 2021, a Santiago de Cuba court ruled that Ferrer had failed to comply with the “restrictions on freedom” and sent him to the Mar Verde prison. His relatives say he has been held incommunicado for long periods of time and suffers health problems.

In June 2022, a court in Havana convicted activists Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel Castillo Pérez, who performed in the 2021 music video “Patria y Vida” (Motherland and Life), which repurposes the government’s old slogan “Patria o Muerte” (Motherland or Death) to criticize repression. They were prosecuted on charges that violate freedom of expression, such as for posting a meme of President Díaz Canel. Otero Alcántara and Castillo Pérez were sentenced to five and nine years in prison, respectively.

Prison Conditions

Prisons are often overcrowded. Detainees have no effective complaint mechanism to seek redress for abuses.

The government continues to deny Cuban and international human rights groups access to prisons. In June 2022, the UN Committee against Torture expressed concern about “allegations of the systematic ill-treatment and torture of inmates.”

Freedom of Expression

The government controls virtually all media in Cuba, restricts access to outside information, and periodically censors critics and independent journalists.

Increased access to the internet has enabled activists to communicate, report on abuses, and organize protests. Some journalists and bloggers publish articles, videos, and news on websites and social media, including X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook.

Authorities routinely block access to many news websites within Cuba and repeatedly impose targeted, and at times widespread, restrictions on critics’ access to mobile phone data.

In May 2023, the National Assembly passed a Social Communication Law that severely restricts the operation of independent media and includes overly broad prohibitions, such as a ban on “promoting the communicational aggression that is occurring against the country,” which could be used to censor criticism.

Labor Rights

Cuba ratified International Labour Organization standards on freedom of association and collective bargaining, but its Labor Code, updated in 2014, violates them.

In an April 2023 report, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights found “systematic patterns of violations of labor rights,” including limited occupational health and safety protection

measures, and lack of freedom of expression in the workplace.

Thousands of Cuban health workers deployed abroad provide valuable services. But the government imposes rules on them that violate their basic rights, including to privacy, liberty, movement, and freedoms of expression and association.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

The government refuses to recognize human rights monitoring as a legitimate activity and denies legal status to Cuban rights groups. Authorities have harassed, assaulted, and imprisoned human rights defenders documenting abuses.

In June 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concluded that the Cuban government was responsible for the 2012 deaths of democracy activists Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The 2019 constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. However, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people suffer violence and discrimination, particularly in Cuba's interior.

Prisoners Defenders reported in July that over 100 transgender women imprisoned in Cuba are held with men, in violation of international human rights standards.

In September 2022, a new family code that included a gender-neutral definition of marriage was approved by referendum, legalizing same-sex marriage.

Disability Rights

Cuba has not aligned its domestic legislation with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or implemented policies to address disability rights in the areas of accessibility, access to justice, legal capacity, education, independent living, and employment. Children with disabilities are sent to special segregated schools.

Women's and Girls' Rights

Cuba decriminalized abortion in 1965. It is available and free at public hospitals.

In July 2023, lawmakers reported an increase in pregnancies in women and girls under 19. Lawmakers said that almost 20 percent of pregnancies in the country were in women and girls between 12 and 19; they also said that in parts of Cuba, early pregnancies were more likely among adolescents who were Black, lived in rural areas, or had low income.

Between January and July, Yo Sí Te Creo, an NGO supporting victims of gender-based violence, reported 54 "femicides" in Cuba. The government does not publish official figures of such gender-based killings.

Key International Actors

For decades, the international community has been unable to secure sustained progress on human rights in Cuba.

The US embargo gives the Cuban government an excuse for problems, a pretext for abuses, and sympathy from governments that might otherwise condemn repressive practices.

In November 2023, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the embargo, with 187 countries in favor, the US and Israel opposed, and Ukraine abstaining.

The European Union continued its policy of “critical engagement” with Cuba. In May 2023, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell visited Cuba. He condemned the US embargo, noting that the EU and Cuba had “differences” regarding the “concept of human rights” but adding that the EU “did not have the capacity nor the will to impose changes in Cuba.” In November, EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore visited Cuba, where he met with the government and civil society groups and called for the release of people who have been arbitrarily detained.

In July, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning systematic human rights violations and abuses against protesters in Cuba.

In May, the US Secretary of State again listed Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, a policy initially implemented by former US President Donald Trump in 2021. President Joe Biden has repeatedly condemned abuses against protesters and imposed targeted sanctions on several officials credibly linked to repression.

In January, the Biden administration announced a “humanitarian parole” program for Cubans who have a financial supporter in the US. In July, the US Department of Homeland Security said that 38,000 Cubans had been vetted and approved for travel in the first six months of the year.

Despite its abysmal human rights record, in October, Cuba was elected to the UN Human Rights Council for the sixth time.