

Mr. PETE GEREN of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I have the honor of representing the tiny community of Poolville in Parker County, TX, northwest of Fort Worth, TX. Poolville headlined the national news last week with grass fires that left hundreds homeless and charred over 20,000 acres.

I want to thank the Federal, State, and county officials for their dedicated work. They responded innovatively, quickly, and helped divert what could have been an even worse disaster. But, above all, Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the hundreds of volunteer firefighters who fought the blaze until it was finally brought under control, fought it well past the point of their personal exhaustion, and kept going until the job was finished.

Mr. Speaker, the selfless response of the neighbors to the plight of those who were the fire victims, neighbors from hundreds of miles away gave of their time, they gave of their money, they gave of their resources, and they opened their homes to attend to the needs of the fire victims. The response was truly an inspiration.

Mr. Speaker, the Poolville fire was a disaster. The human response to the fire to this disaster, was a triumph of the human spirit.

AN IMPORTANT DAY IN THE LIVES OF ENSLAVED CUBANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Florida [Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Mr. Speaker, certainly today has been a very important day in the lives of the enslaved Cuban people, people who daily cry out for freedom, for democracy, and for justice, because today we are going to have the privilege of inviting family members of the four pilots who were mercilessly cut down, shot down from the sky by Fidel Castro with his Migs.

Together with the chairman of the Committee on International Relations, the gentleman from New York BEN GILMAN and the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee chairman, the gentleman from Indiana, DAN BURTON, I have invited the family members of the four deceased pilots murdered by Cuban tyrant Fidel Castro aboard the Brothers to the Rescue aircraft to testify before a congressional hearing of the Committee on International Relations which will take place this Thursday, February 29, at 10 a.m.

I think it is important to put a human face on this barbaric act so that the international community and Members of Congress understand that Castro's brutal act will forever leave a mark on the loving memories of these pilots who gave their lives to help bring freedom and democracy to Cuba.

Today, as I have throughout the weekend, I spoke to the father of Mario de la Pena, the mother of Carlos Costa, to the sister of Armando Alejandre, Jr. and with the girlfriend of Pablo Mo-

rales. And all these individuals have been called time and time again in the international media as Cuban exiles. I think it is important to note that some of these individuals were born right here in the United States. They are U.S. citizens and yet even though they were born here, they feel very fervently in their hearts that dream for freedom and justice to the enslaved people of Cuba.

Many individuals do not know what Brothers to the Rescue is. There is a humanitarian group that came about because they felt great pain when they would see their brothers and sisters in the high seas being taken over by either the seas or the storms or the sharks in the straits between Cuba and Florida. And so these volunteer pilots, none of them on any payroll, on their own started flying humanitarian missions helping our U.S. Coast Guard in identifying where these rafters were in the high seas.

They would drop supplies to them, such as a bottle of water, perhaps a life preserver so that they could continue hanging onto dear life while the valiant members of the U.S. Coast Guard would fly out there to retrieve them and to be reunited with their loved ones.

We congratulate the U.S. Coast Guard for their valiant service, so many years of service to our community and this humanitarian effort, and they would not be able to do as good a job as they had done without Brothers to the Rescue.

This was another routine flight for the brothers, yet Castro has incorrectly classified them as interfering in his territory, and he sent out his Migs and they shot down these two small planes, Cessna planes from the sky, causing the deaths of what we think is the deaths, they have not, their bodies have not been recovered in spite of many search and rescue missions of the Coast Guard, resulting in the deaths of these four brave men, some of them, as I point out, U.S. citizens.

Were the Brothers to the Rescue planes breaking the law? I think some Castro apologists want to keep bringing that up. I think President Clinton's statement, Secretary of State Warren Christopher's statements, U.S. Ambassador Madeleine Albright's statements have been very clear and to the point. They have said that they were shot down in international territory and this is an illegal act. These were civilian, small unarmed planes where they clearly identified themselves as such. They identified who was in the plane. And they have testified, the pilots who were there, the eyewitnesses as well as U.S. officials, that this was an illegal act and totally contrary to what is normally practiced by free nations.

Obviously, Castro likes to prove time and time again that he is indeed a proud member of that list of the pariah states. Along with Congressman LINCOLN DIAZ-BALART, who will be speaking in just a few moments, we have

known what Brothers to the Rescue was all about. We have known about those missions and the community has greatly supported them. Jose Basulto, the leader of Brothers to the Rescue, will also be with us, Congressman DEUTSCH, PETER DEUTSCH spoke today, Congressman McCOLLUM, PORTER GOSS. This is a terrible crime that has united our community in saying the truth that we have known about Fidel Castro, that he is a merciless tyrant.

So although we congratulate President Clinton for his sanctions, we want him to go further with establishing a naval blockade, establishing international sanctions against the tyrant. We hope to move on legislation to help bring those changes about.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. STEARNS] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. STEARNS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. GOSS] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. GOSS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California [Mr. RIGGS] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. RIGGS addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

IN UPPORT OF STRONG ACTION AGAINST FIDEL CASTRO

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. DUNCAN). Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Florida (Mrs. MEEK) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. MEEK of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I am one of the gentlewoman from Florida, along with my colleagues, ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN and LINCOLN DIAZ-BALART. I am privileged to rise in strong support of the Helm-Burton bill, which I am a cosponsor on, and also I signed the Cuban Democracy Act. But I did not just sign those bills just for the sake of it, Mr. Speaker, I signed on it because I believe very strongly in the Cuban people and what is happening to them in Castro's Cuba.

From time to time, Mr. Speaker, we are called upon to take strong action against what we see as something that is anti-democratic and in my opinion, it is evil. In the past this body took strong action, an economic embargo, against the evil of apartheid. I strongly supported that. Apartheid in South Africa needed to be released. This country and this Congress came to their aid. Our efforts were successful, Mr. Speaker, and apartheid was ended.

Only a few months ago I had the privilege of greeting the elected president of a free democracy and that is South Africa, President Nelson Mandela. If it were not for this Congress, we would not have been able to do this. I strongly supported the economic embargo against the military thugs who terrorized the nation of Haiti. Today Haiti is making strides and moving toward democracy. And I have had the privilege to greet the democratically elected President of Haiti.

Mr. Speaker, the time has come that we take strong and decisive action against Fidel Castro's Cuba. I repeat, it is time that we take strong action. I am not an expert in foreign affairs. I cannot tell this Government what to do. But I am making a plea for strong action against Castro's Cuba.

It is always difficult, Mr. Speaker, I think, for Americans to truly understand in a personal way the suffering of people in other countries. But I am from Miami, Mr. Speaker, which is only 90 miles from Castro's Cuba. The brutality of the situation in Cuba is something we live with every day. We see what happens with the Cuban people when atrocities are perpetrated against their families who are in Cuba. I do not think anyone that hears my voice would want this to happen to any of their families.

So many of our constituents have fled from Castro's prisons. So many of our constituents still have relatives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. I am asking this Congress to take that into consideration, to think this might be members of their families undergoing hardship and oppression.

So many of my constituents have left everything they worked for. Whatever they had in Cuba, they do not have anymore. So it is important that we understand that, Mr. Speaker. Just as we helped the people of South Africa and the people of Haiti, we must now help the people of Cuba in the time of their greatest need and in the hour of their greatest hope.

There are those who say that we should invest in Cuba and keep closer ties. This is certainly an option but I do not believe it would be effective. I do not think it will work. Foreign investments in Cuba are used to prop up Castro, not improve the lives of the Cuban people. Castro is desperate, as I perceive it, and I get all my information from people in my district. He is very desperate for foreign currency and he will say and do almost anything to get it. He needs that money. But we do not forget that there is no meaningful economic freedom in Cuba.

Workers are prevented from organizing labor unions, a basic economic right we have taken for granted. In fact, under Cuban labor laws employees are actually assigned by the government, not hired by employers. And foreign trade is a monopoly reserved for the privileged friends of the regime.

I could go on and on, Mr. Speaker, telling you the way I feel and the way

my constituents feel back in Miami. How can we talk about investing in a regime where workers cannot organize, where employees and workers are exploited and people are still imprisoned for speaking their minds.

We believe very strongly in the freedom of speech here in this country because we have a democracy. If it is a Communist regime, we cannot control it. Therefore, we must work hard to make Cuba into a democracy.

We have been successful with that, Mr. Speaker, all over the world. So we must not break our record with Cuba. He is clinging to power. I think Castro's government is in its death throes, but it is going to need the help of the United States. The Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act of 1995 would tighten this embargo against Castro as we did against the corrupt governments of South Africa and Haiti. I believe it will greatly hasten the fall of Castro's dictatorship.

Mr. Speaker, I look forward to the time in the near future when I can greet here in this Capitol the democratically elected President of a free Cuba as I have greeted others, as I have the democratically elected President of a free South Africa and a free Haiti. They all are in the same situation, governed by a dictator. I strongly urge my colleagues to throw their strength behind the Helms-Burton bill. I do not care who developed this bill, Mr. Speaker. I do not care about the argument either in parties or wherever, whether this is a bipartisan issue or not. But I am saying, everyone who has any sense of humanitarian work should appeal and do whatever they can to help Cuba. So I urge Members to support Cuba. It will someday be free, democratically.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan [Mr. SMITH] is recognized for 5 minutes.

[Mr. SMITH of Michigan addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.]

CASTRO'S TYRANNY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. DIAZ-BALART] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DIAZ-BALART. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank from the bottom of my heart Congresswoman MEEK and, of course, Congresswoman ROS-LEHTINEN. I heard also earlier today Congressman MENENDEZ and Congressman GOSS and perhaps I missed others, but I want to thank them all for their concern on this, about this horrible tragedy that occurred on Saturday. There is so much to say. I really think it is important to put it in perspective.

This is connected, this horrible crime by Castro, is connected to a crackdown that he began on the 15th of February

against the internal opposition in Cuba. Over 130 of the dissident groups in Cuba had announced that they were going to meet on February 24th, this last Saturday, peacefully, and seek ways to achieve a democratic transition. They even asked Castro for permission. The answer came in by way of a massive crackdown.

The elected leaders of the opposition and most of the delegates who were already on their way for the February 24 meeting were arrested. The chairman, the national chairman of this group called the Cuban Council, was arrested and summarily sentenced to a prison term, as was the vice chairman. Another vice chairman, a lady, was arrested and taken to a hospital for surgery that the regime called necessary surgery. No one has heard yet from her since. And as I mentioned, the chairman, Leonel Molejon Almagro was sentenced to a prison term. His mother was able to see him once. He was arrested on the 15th of February. She says she fears that he is receiving electroshock torture. And Castro wanted to send a very strong message, spine chilling message to the Cuban people, and he did so on Saturday by murdering Americans who are in unarmed airplanes in international waters on the high seas.

Why did he do that? The message is clear that Castro is sending to the Cuban people. He is saying, if I can kill Americans in international waters with impunity, imagine what I can do to you, the Cuban people. That is the message that he is sending. Every once in awhile Castro needs a dose of blood to scare, terrorize the Cuban people and maintain his totalitarian grip.

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But what we have to ask ourselves is to what extent are we going to permit and until when are we going to permit Castro to act with impunity. Mark my words, Mr. Speaker, if President Clinton does not make it clear to Castro that any further attempts at blackmailing the United States will be met inevitably with a total blockade of Cuba, including oil shipments, mark my word we will see in the next hours another attempt by Castro to blackmail President Clinton.

Mr. Speaker, Castro's crimes against humanity began at the very beginning of his regime in 1959 with show trials that seemed, that recalled, the spectacles of the Roman Coliseum, and the crimes continue to this day. In addition to the drug trafficking and the money laundering and counterfeiting and all the crimes that Castro is engaged in, there are additional crimes Mr. Speaker, that clearly qualified as crimes against humanity.

Today I received a message from one opponent within Cuba who is not under arrest at this time, and his suggestion is that we, the United States Government, support the indictment of Castro as a war criminal; in other words, for crimes against humanity in the International Court of Justice in the Hague.