



International Committee for Peace, Justice and Dignity

On Heels of Obama's Historic Visit to Cuba, Advocates to Gather in Washington

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The International Committee for Peace, Justice and Dignity is returning to Washington next month to increase pressure on President Barack Obama to do more to reduce the impact of the failed 55-year-old blockade against Cuba, and to encourage Congress to pass legislation to finally eliminate it entirely.

President Obama and the executive branch continue to announce new regulations that ease restrictions against Cuba in such areas as travel and commerce, yet the teeth of the criminal blockade against Cuba remains intact.

The International Committee, accompanied by dozens of supporters from across the United States and beyond, will descend on Washington from April 18-22 for a second "Days of Action against the Blockade."

They not only will undertake grassroots advocacy visits to the offices of Senators and members of the House of Representatives, but also stage a community forum, "*Through Cuban Eyes*," to provide Americans with a Cuban perspective on what's been happening in Cuba and the real state of U.S.-Cuban relations.

The key note speaker at the April 22nd community forum will be Cuban Ambassador José Ramón Cabañas. Invited guests from Cuba include medical professionals who took part in the fight against Ebola in West Africa and in restructuring the health infrastructure in Haiti, the Director of Havana's Literacy Museum, a representative of the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People (ICAP), and a Cuban journalism student with his own dramatic story to tell.

Jorge "Jorgito" Jáquez was born with cerebral palsy in Cuba in 1993, but today - thanks to Cuba's health care and education system - he has become a "self-sufficient, independent young journalist." *The Power of the Weak*, a documentary by German filmmaker Tobias Kriele about Jorgito's life and the social supports available to him in Cuba, will be screened during the Days of Action.

While acknowledging the significance of President Obama's decision in December 2014 to end, in his words, the United States' "*outdated approach [to Cuba] that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests*," and the President's recent historic visit to Cuba, Alicia Jrapko of the International Committee explained there is much more Obama can do to help normalize relations with Cuba.

"Although we applaud many of the steps taken, we urge the President to use his executive power to close Guantanamo Prison and return to Cuba the land it sits on. He should also end the preferential "Wet Foot, Dry Foot" Policy that encourages Cubans to embark on illegal and unsafe migration; end the Parole Program for Cuban Medical Professionals that encourages Cuban doctors to abandon Cuba's medical programs abroad; and stop funding USAID and National Endowment for Democracy programs aimed at fomenting dissent in Cuba."

Netfa Freeman from the Institute for Policy Studies, one of the groups organizing the upcoming April events in Washington DC, noted that a majority of Americans, including Cuban Americans, support ending the blockade. *"Part of this support,"* says Freeman, *"is from heightened awareness of the hypocrisy in U.S. claims of wanting to encourage change for a Cuban society that is not experiencing a national epidemic of killings of people of color by police and mass incarceration or social ills like rampant homelessness. The overwhelming majority of Cubans are guaranteed shelter and healthcare as human rights."*

Freeman pointed to the success of a recent whirlwind 10-day visit to the West Coast by Miguel Fraga, the first secretary of the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C., as another sign of the changing mood. Fraga spoke to close to 1,500 people at 20 different events, and was even introduced on the California State Senate floor. *"The cold war is over!"* declared Los Angeles State Senator Isadore Hall III as the Cuban flag was displayed in the chambers. *"It is time to look forward and to look ahead to a future where Cuba is a partner, not an enemy to the United States."*

As part of the tour of the Cuban diplomat speaking at a conference in Seattle, Washington State's veteran 7th District Rep. Jim McDermott urged the audience to "go to Washington in April to lobby to end the blockade."

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