

# SOLIDARIDAD

 **Witness for Peace**  
Transforming People — Transforming Policy

SUMMER 2012

Volume 4 Issue 3

## Cuba: Everyone Has a Theory, Few Have a Clue



*Although it's only 90 miles from Florida to Cuba, the U.S. embargo and travel ban separate the two countries. WFP People-to-People delegations to Cuba seek to bridge the differences.*

PHOTO CREDIT: JESS HUNTER-BOWMAN

No one knows for sure in what direction Cuba will head, but everyone knows that things are on the move. The average U.S. citizen barely thinks of Cuba, while the ordinary Cuban citizen is too focused on staying afloat to be concerned with the outside world. Some in Miami hope for a semblance of an Arab Spring. Others throughout the states, young and empowered Cuban Americans, simply hope to become better acquainted with a country they have never known yet have always identified with, and maybe even make a few investments.

Everyone has a theory, but no one has a clue. The only knowledge we have is of the failure of our 52 year old economic embargo.

The fact of the matter is that Cuba has been isolated for so long from the “western world” that people on either side of the Florida Straits find it hard to focus on how things got to where they are, much less improve them. Socialism is a dirty word in the states, while Capitalism in Cuba is an insult.

Nevertheless, millions of U.S. citizens go to school for free, are looked after by state sponsored health care programs and are enrolled in a food distribution system that ensures access to nourishment when in dire straits. In Cuba, there exists something similar. Stateside we call it Public Education, Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, while here in Cuba they simply call it Socialism. By that same token,

private enterprise is encouraged, small business is providing employment, competition is on the rise and innovation is on the forefront of many minds. In the United States we recognize this as Capitalism, while here they view this as part of a series of necessary reforms.

### U.S. Policy

In 1960 the Kennedy administration initiated an embargo with the hopes of bringing Cuba's economy and the Castro government to its knees. The Cold War was heating up and all options were on the table.

In 1992 and 1996 respectively, two new laws were enacted by then presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton: the Torricelli Act and the Helms-Burton Act. These laws were implemented with the ambition of bringing down the house on a Cuban leadership that was deemed illegitimate and anachronistic.

To top it off, a group of well-heeled Cuban exiles resentful of having lost their lot to Fidel's conquering army conspired and plotted against the new establishment. In their view, everything was worth risking against the socialist threat. After having lost all of their investments, properties and homes, and fleeing their country for fear of further persecution, they dug in and fought back from afar in a bitter feud that some have referred to as a “bad divorce”.

Fifty two years later both sides continue to wave fingers at one another. Cuban

*(Continued on back page)*

# Message From Sharon

I have close friends in Cuba. Daisy and Rita are both my age; they grew up under Fidel Castro's revolution. Rita's family's land was confiscated and all fled to Miami except Rita and her mother. While both Rita and Daisy have children living close to them in Cuba, both have children that decided to leave the island.

While often celebrating the good things in their lives, Rita and Daisy also talk about how hard life can be. No one would suggest the 52 year-old embargo has achieved its goals, but it certainly has brought pain to ordinary Cubans. Rita and Daisy don't blame all the hardships on the embargo. Yet they are clear that life would be easier without it.

Daisy's daughter was diagnosed with thyroid cancer a few years ago. Today she is cancer free but needs a daily dose of thyroid medication which is hard to access because of the embargo. Rita's daughter's music career is hampered due to the difficulty in getting equipment for her band. Sometimes it's hard to find basic supplies for their households. But both deeply love their country. They support what they consider good policies and critique and work to change policies they feel hinder peace and justice in their country.

I would love to introduce you to Rita and Daisy on a WFP delegation. At the time of this writing we are waiting for a renewal of our People to People license by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. A renewal will allow hundreds of U.S. citizens the opportunity to travel to Cuba to exchange ideas, share commonalities, culture and challenges with Cubans and to see the impact of U.S. policies. If the renewal application is rejected, we will continue to host professional research delegations under a general license. But many will find it difficult to travel to Cuba and will be denied the opportunity to meet ordinary Cuban citizens like Rita and Daisy.

In addition to inviting you to join me on a Cuba delegation, I want to offer you a heart-felt thanks for supporting our work in Honduras.

People there continue to suffer the brutal impact of U.S. aid to the military and police. In the special insert to this newsletter you will read the reflections of a WFP staff person who accompanied a group of Honduran human rights defenders on a mission to La Moskitia in May to investigate the DEA supported drug raid that killed four Hondurans, including two pregnant women and a 14 year-old boy. Witness for Peace has partnered with PROAH, which provides international human rights accompaniment in Honduras, to stand with Hondurans seeking to bring peace and justice to their country after years of violence. Please consider joining the WFP and Friendship Office of the Americas delegation to Honduras in November to witness the effect of U.S. military policies there.

Finally, a huge thank you to all of you that have joined us in standing with a group of Colombian GM workers who were fired after debilitating workplace injuries. As I write this, they are getting set to enter their fourth week of a hunger strike. Witness for Peace supporters have fasted with them, protested with them and sent messages of support. You, my friends, are teaching me anew what is solidarity in action.

Peace,



Sharon Hostetler,  
Executive Director



## DELEGATIONS

### Colombia

January 4-14, 2013

***"The Historical and Ongoing 'War on Drugs' And it's Effects on Colombian Communities."***

January 4-14, 2013

***Colombia: Examining the Historical and Continuing Failures of the 'War on Drugs', and Exploring Grassroots Alternatives***

January 18-28, 2013

***Militarism and the Free Trade Agreement***

### Cuba

Nov 17-27, 2012

***Exploring the Effects of 50 Years of the U.S. Embargo (pending license renewal)***

Dec 10-20, 2012

***Professional Organizers***

Feb 15-25, 2013

***The Good Food Revolution (pending license renewal)***

March 10-20, 2013

***Medical Care in Cuba (pending license renewal)***



A WFP People-to-People delegation visits one of the largest urban gardens in Havana.

PHOTO CREDIT: MARILYN ALEXANDER

### Honduras

November 8-18, 2012

***Militarization in Honduras & the SOA (travel to the SOA Vigil after the delegation)***

### Mexico

Sep 22-30, 2012

***Understanding the Drug War through the Impact of the Merida Initiative and Judicial Reform***

### Nicaragua

March 10-20, 2013

***College Student Delegation: Free Trade and the Roots of Migration***

For more information or inquiries regarding custom delegations please contact Ken Crowley at [ken@witnessforpeace.org](mailto:ken@witnessforpeace.org) or (202) 423-3402.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

## Grassroots Action

**Witness for Peace Northeast** is excited to plan the fall speaker's tour with Aida Quilcue, an indigenous leader from Colombia. We are also developing our board and have three interns who are helping with new tour venues, identifying immigrant/human rights groups in our region, and developing the process for instituting "hubs" of WFPNE activity throughout New England.

**Witness for Peace Northwest** is busy fighting the Trans-Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement with actions, petitions, and legislative lobbying. We are planning a speaker's tour in October with a speaker from Cuba, and a delegation to Honduras in November in partnership with WFPSE, and WFPUMW: for more information about the speaker's tour or the upcoming Honduras delegation, please contact Field Organizer Amy Truax directly at [amy@witnessforpeace.org](mailto:amy@witnessforpeace.org).

**Witness for Peace Southeast** is planning an organizers' retreat (October 12-13) featuring Irma Rosales Ojeda, community organizer from Oaxaca, a presentation from the Cuba delegation, a workshop on immigration reform, and hopefully speakers from the NC Dream Team and Farm Labor Organizing Committee. We are also coordinating a Nov. 8-18 delegation to Honduras/School of the Americas in Georgia along with WFPNW, WFPUMW.

**Witness for Peace Southwest** is encouraging members to volunteer with No More Deaths on the Arizona/Mexico border and planning a fall retreat and conference in Ojai, California; we will launch a fall speaker and webinar series on Honduras, Migrant Rights, and Colombia as well as recruit for a Cuba Delegation in December. Check out the Southwest Facebook page ("Witness for Peace Southwest") and get involved by emailing [southwestwfp@gmail.com](mailto:southwestwfp@gmail.com) or calling **805-421-9708**.

**Witness for Peace Upper Midwest** is preparing for an October speaker's tour with Tomás Gómez Membreño on the theme 'United States Intervention in Honduras and the Effects on Indigenous Peoples (La Intervención Estadounidense en Honduras: Efectos en Los Pueblos Indígenas).' The region is working on strengthening the local board with new board members from around the region.

**Witness for Peace Mid Atlantic** will host Leonila Romero González, from Veracruz, Mexico on a speaker tour Oct. 6-27. Leonila works with a Catholic migrant ministry, Las Patronas an organization that aids Central American migrants on their way through Mexico and with an organization in Mexico City that works to secure documentation for Central American migrants. The tour will be in Long Island, NY from the 22nd to the 26th of October. Please follow the WFP website ([www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org)) for dates and further information as it develops.

**To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit [witnessforpeace.org/grassroots](http://witnessforpeace.org/grassroots).**

## Witness for Peace Demands Investigation for LGBTQI Killings in Honduras, Transparency in Trans-Pacific Partnership Talks

This past June, WFP grassroots were at the forefront of securing signatures for two Congressional sign-on letters on two important issues.

One was from Representative Jared Polis to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urging the State Department to pressure the Honduran government to fully investigate killings of LGBTQI-identified Hondurans (at least 70 have been killed since the 2009 coup) and adopt effective protection measures for said individuals. The letter also points out the State Department's own assertion that Honduran police officers, who the U.S. government helps to equip and otherwise assist, have "targeted vulnerable persons, including LGBTQI people." An impressive 84 members of Congress signed onto this letter. Thanks to WFP members that contacted their representatives. WFP is planning to significantly increase its human rights documentation and accompaniment work in Honduras, so please get in touch with us through [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org) for ways you can support us and get organized in your area!

The second Dear Colleague was from Representatives Rosa DeLauro and George Miller, urging the U.S. Trade Representative for more transparency and stronger congressional consultations in the

negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which has been called "NAFTA on steroids." Thus far, neither Congress nor citizens have had any input on this far-reaching FTA, which covers the U.S. and many other countries touching the Pacific Ocean, and to which any country may join or "dock." Furthermore, the text of the TPP has only been released to a select group of mostly industry representatives. 133 members of Congress signed onto the letter. As the negotiations continue, we need to keep the pressure on to expose and stop this dangerous FTA! Contact your Regional Organizer or the National Grassroots Organizer ([walker@witnessforpeace.org](mailto:walker@witnessforpeace.org)) to find out how you can get involved in this effort!

## Witness for Peace at the School of the Americas Vigil

Witness for Peace will be present at the vigil to call for the closure of the School of the Americas and remember the SOA's victims November 16-18 in Fort Benning, GA. Join us at the Colombia teach-in on Friday afternoon and for other workshops to be announced. As noted above, several WFP regions are coordinating a delegation to Honduras that plans to end at the SOA vigil. For more information, contact your Regional Organizer, or the National Grassroots Organizer at [walker@witnessforpeace.org](mailto:walker@witnessforpeace.org).

For full program updates and travel schedule details, visit [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org).

(Continued from front page)



*Daisy Rojas' daughter in her early 20's was diagnosed with thyroid cancer a few years ago. Although she is cancer free now she needs to take a daily dose of thyroid medication which is not easily available in Cuba due to the embargo.*

PHOTO CREDIT: DIEGO BENITEZ

critics often accuse the Cuban government of using the “blockade”, as the embargo is known here, as a scapegoat to justify to its people why conditions are difficult or austere, why a blackout might occur or why a street isn't paved; why water stopped running or why there is a beef shortage. The list for scapegoating the U.S. for everyday hardships, so they say, goes on and on; from a shortage of toilet paper to a shortage of oil; a lack of medicine to inclement weather.

A lot of these qualms are with merit, many are not. Most Cubans agree with this last sentence. They know that the embargo is not the sole reason why sugar, which was once the main Cuban export, is in such short supply. Or why beef is such a rare commodity and milk, a necessity for growing children, scarcely finds its way to a kitchen table. There are a myriad of societal challenges that are due to self-injury and not to foreign aggression.

“We know that we have made mistakes” says Daisy Rojas, program coordinator for the international relations department of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center in downtown Havana. “Throughout the course of the past few decades we have had to change much of what we thought we were doing right and in the process came to recognize that it is the responsibility of every generation to

change and improve the wrongs of those they follow. We are always trying to move in that direction”.

Even Fidel Castro, the beloved and loathed icon of the Cuban revolution, has openly admitted to not having achieved many of the aspirations that were hoped for throughout the revolution. But he had help. The U.S. embargo has had a role to play in shaping the Cuba of today. By restraining U.S. companies, including subsidiaries abroad, from trading with Cuba as well as threatening punitive action against non-U.S. companies that do the same, our policies have placed a stranglehold on the Cuban economy and pushed it to near isolation.

This archaic policy is what compelled Witness for Peace to organize People-to-People delegations bringing individuals to Cuba. We value and prioritize delegations in all of our program sites as a way of bridging the differences that divide our hemisphere. These groups do not come as tourists, but as concerned individuals representing a North American society. The goal always is to learn the truth.

### Striving for a new tomorrow

Today young Cubans are growing up in a time of material need. They know that when the economic curtain falls between both countries a wave of predatory investment will threaten to drown them out. Far from hunkering down, they are embracing this idea and steadily maneuvering to improve their lot while enhancing their competitiveness.

Private enterprise is flourishing throughout the country with well-educated young adults at the helm. Cuba is welcoming small business and private

capital more than ever before and change, albeit slow and steady, is on the horizon; everyone can sense it.

Regardless of the transformation that comes, it is indisputable that as long as the spirit of the 1959 revolution continues to drive its leadership Cuba will stay on a path of socialism and national unity. This no one should doubt.

In a few short years Raul Castro will no longer be in power and shortly thereafter most of the original revolutionary icons will have passed on. Term limits have been approved by the National Assembly and every leader henceforth will be limited to two five year terms. The hope is that Cuban youth embrace this change while preserving the accomplishments of the revolution and for the U.S. to stay out of the mix.

It is about time to drop the charade. U.S. policies have done little to effect change in Cuban leadership and even less to break their wallets or wills. It is time we let go of our dogged hold on the immoral idea that strangling a neighbor's economy will make her our friend. Until we do that the one deep suspicion the world will have is that somewhere in a cavernous chamber where U.S. policy is made, there is fear that a small defiant nation of 11 million offers hope to billions across the globe. And a shift in the status quo of that magnitude might very well be due to policy making of our own.



*With recent economic reforms private enterprise is flourishing throughout the country. A small pizza stand is open for business.*

PHOTO CREDIT: DIEGO BENITEZ

# “The Bullets Fell From Above Like Rain”

Early in the morning on May 11th helicopters from a DEA supported drug raid opened fire onto a canoe filled with innocent women, children and men on the Patuca River in Honduras. Among the victims who lost their lives were two pregnant women and a 14 year-old boy.

Witness for Peace in partnership with PROAH, which provides international human rights accompaniment in Honduras, accompanied a group of Honduran human rights defenders from COFADEH (Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras), on a mission to La Moskitia to investigate the attack. This mission was among the first on the scene. The WFP accompanier shares some of her experiences.

**One of the nights that I spent there, I dreamt that I was being shot at by machine guns.** It was dark and all I could see were bright lights showering down like fireworks. For the passengers on the boat this nightmare was their reality.

Hilda Lezama, a survivor who I met in the local hospital said that she had fallen asleep on the boat and woke to bullets falling like rain. One of those bullets left her with a grave wound in both of her legs. From her hospital bed she told us that she tried to escape the overheard attack, but her injury and the continued gunfire prevented her from getting out of the river for almost two hours. Her wounds became seriously infected, likely due to the amount of time she was stuck in the water before being rescued. She recalled no warning from the DEA helicopter; no lights shone down from above. All she remembers was waking up to a barrage of bullets.

The next day I shared my dream with



*The Hasked Brooks Wood family mourns the death of 14 year old Hasked killed in the reckless attack supported by forces of the Drug Enforcement Agency.*

PHOTO CREDIT: MARVIN PALACIOS

one of the members of the group of human rights defenders and journalists that I was accompanying. He responded that he'd had a similar nightmare. I wondered if we were so affected by these events, how the survivors and victims' families manage to cope with this trauma.

After that conversation I met a two year-old girl, another passenger on that boat. She was sitting on the wooden steps of her home with her 11 year-old sister who also survived the botched raid. The toddler watched curiously as her sister shyly described how they managed to reach land that morning. The youngest sister rode on her mother's back to shore; the oldest fended for herself even though she doesn't know how to swim. They appeared physically unscathed but looking into the young girls' eyes I asked myself what kind of dreams they will have at night and what kind of memories they will carry with them throughout the rest of their lives.

Other nights since Ahuas, when I close my eyes I see the face of the 14 year-old boy that was killed. Sadly I don't see a smiling young teenager. I see the image of his recovered body that his older sister showed me when we visited their

home. His body was missing for almost two days before it was found.

For me the pain of the survivors and families of the victims is tangible and visceral, because I saw the tears, the wounds, the canoe with 20 bullet holes, the grief and indignation. But it should not just be missions like ours who see this first hand in order to piece together who was responsible for that fatal morning.

Since the May 11 attacks, DEA officials have been involved in at least two more operations and have admitted killing at least two people on Honduran soil. The official U.S. government line is that the Honduran authorities are investigating the events. Due to the level of U.S. involvement in these incidents and the State Department's own human rights reports documenting the rampant impunity in Honduras, why is the U.S. not conducting its own investigation or at the very least providing more direct support to the Honduran investigation? It would only be fitting since the U.S. DEA was "supporting" the operation.

The truth is that it is much more convenient for the U.S. to allow the memories to fade, the evidence to disappear, and the investigation to drag out indefinitely like thousands of others. That way they can more easily evade answers to questions about what type of support and advice the DEA gave, what role they actually played in the operation, and why the U.S. government supports Honduran security forces that have been implicated in human rights abuses.

It is time for the U.S. government to look into the eyes of the survivors and families of victims themselves.