

**KEY ADDRESS BY DR. FIDEL CASTRO RUZ, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF CUBA, TO A SOLEMN SESSION OF THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY MEETING IN THE FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PALACE.
VENEZUELA, OCTOBER 27, 2000 [1]**

Date:

27/10/2000

His Excellency, Mister Hugo Chavez Frías, President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela;

His Excellency, Mister President of the National Assembly of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela;

His Excellency, Mister President of the Supreme Court of Justice;

His Excellency, Mister Chairman of the Republican Moral Council and other members;

His Excellency, Mister President of the National Electoral Council;

His Excellencies ambassadors, honorable chargé d'affairs and representatives of the honorable deputies to the National Assembly;

High religious and military authorities;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Venezuelans:

I am not here for protocol reasons or because tradition would have it that official guests visit Parliament. I do not belong to that stock of men who run after honors, ask for privileges or live the slaves of conceit. When visiting a country, particularly if it is a beloved sister country such as Venezuela, I respect the wishes of those whom I feel represent it with great dignity and courage.

Regrettably, the very idea of my visit to the Venezuelan Parliament, included in the itinerary by our hosts, was a source of annoyance to some of its distinguished members. I offer my apologies.

It is my duty to be polite but I will equally avoid an excessively refined language, too diplomatic or reeking of affectation. I shall rather use deliberately clear and sincerely honest words.

It is not my first visit to the Venezuelan Parliament; the first time was over 41 years ago. However, it would not be accurate to say that I have returned to the same institution or that I am the same man I was then. The closest thing to the truth is, in fact, that this is a different man coming to a different Parliament.

Personally, I have no merits to take credit for or apologies to offer. At that time, I was a 32-year-old inexperienced man who by mere chance had survived many risks. I was simply lucky and that is not something I take credit for. Usually, human beings have plenty of dreams and ideals which very few

enjoy the elusive privilege of seeing realized but even if they do that gives them no right to boast.

That Parliament, which I had the honor to meet with so long ago, also had plenty of dreams and hopes. A popular uprising had succeeded months before. Everything has changed since. Those dreams and hopes were reduced to ashes and it is on those ashes that new hopes and this Parliament have been built. All along the evolution of history people have had dreams, a right that will forever exist. The great miracle is that the hopes and dreams of this noble and heroic people may come true.

Like many of you, I also harbor such dreams starting from the idea that extraordinary events have occurred in Venezuela at the end of the last four decades. For example, Venezuelans who had fought against each other in the past have become revolutionary allies, the same as guerrilla men have become outstanding politicians, and soldiers have turned into daring statesmen who are raising high the banners that once filled this nation with glory.

It is not for me to pass judgement on those who moved from the left to the right, or many who began as honest conservatives only to end up plundering and deceiving the people. It is neither my purpose, nor can I assume the right, to play judge of the personalities involved in the dramatic experiences you have endured.

All men are ephemeral and often erratic, even those who act in good faith. Then, I rather abide by the right that José Martí bequeathed every Cuban and that is to feel an enormous admiration for Venezuela and for that man who was the greatest among dreamers and statesmen in our hemisphere: Simón Bolívar. He had the capacity to conceive a united, independent and Latin American homeland, and to fight for it. He was never in favor of colonialism or the monarchy, not even at a time when the Patriotic Juntas were created as an expression of rebelliousness against the imposition of an alien monarch in the Spanish throne, as proven in the Oath of the Sacred Mount.

Virtually from adolescence Bolívar was resolutely on the side of independence, that is, as early as 1805. Half of South America was freed by his sword and, in the historic battle of Ayacucho with his troops of victorious lowland fighters and brave soldiers of the Great Colombia established by him and under direct command of the immortal General Sucre, he ensured the independence of the rest of South and Central America.

The United States of America was then, as we all know, just a group of recently liberated British colonies enmeshed in an expansionist process. Still, the genius of the great Venezuelan leader allowed him to guess, at that very early stage, that "...they seem destined by Providence to spread calamities in the Americas in the name of freedom."

I perfectly understand the diversity of interests and criteria that inevitably exist in Venezuela today. It has been said that addressing his troops before the battle of the Pyramids, during his campaign in Egypt, Napoleon Bonaparte said: "Soldiers, from the top of these Pyramids, forty centuries are looking upon you."

As a visitor greatly honored by the invitation to address this assembly, I would dare say with absolute modesty: Venezuelan brothers and sisters, from this rostrum, 41 years and 10 months of experience in the restless struggle against hostility and aggression, by the mightiest power that has ever existed on earth, are looking upon you in admiration sharing the hard and strenuous battle that you are fighting today on the inspiration of Simón Bolívar.

The much-touted argument that Venezuela intends to introduce Cuba's revolutionary model has been used to describe relations between Cuba and Venezuela. There was so much talking about that on the eve of the referendum on the draft of the new Venezuelan Constitution, that I found myself in the need to invite a group of outstanding local journalists who made us the honor of visiting in representation of major journals, radio stations and TV networks. Actually, those who were cynically invoking Cuba as an evil ghost --the way the imperialists depict it in their gross lies-- made us feel entitled to hold such a

press conference.

In a sleepless night as I had not lived one, not even in my feverish youth as a student, I read and underlined the basic concepts in that draft and compared them with those in our own Constitution. Later, holding the Cuban Constitution in one hand and the Venezuelan draft in the other, I pointed out the profound differences between one and the other revolutionary concepts. And I say revolutionary because they both are. They both intend to provide a better life for their peoples; the wish for radical changes; they are longing for justice; their mutual aspiration is to attain a closer unity among the peoples of the Americas as defined by José Martí when he said: "What else could be said when it is not even necessary! There is only one people from the Bravo River to the Patagonia." Both are steadily fighting for the preservation of their sovereignty, their independence and their cultural identities.

Our Constitution is essentially based on the social property of the means of production and the planning of development; on the active, organized and massive participation of all the people in political activities and the construction of a new society; on the close unity of all the people under the leadership of a Party that looks after norms and principles but that does not nominate or elects the people's representatives to the state bodies, since this is a task carried out fully by the people through their mass organizations and the established legal procedures.

The Venezuelan Constitution rests on a market economy scheme where private property is extensively guaranteed. Montesquieu's three famous powers proclaimed as the main pillars of the traditional bourgeois democracy are complemented with new bodies and the strength required to preserving the balance in the political leadership of the society. The multiparty system is also set forth as a basic element. Actually, one had to be really ignorant to find any similarity between the two Constitutions.

At that meeting with the Venezuelan media representatives I also denounced the first steps of the terrorist Cuban American Mafiosi in Miami to assassinate the President of Venezuela. Those gangsters felt, in a way, that Venezuela could be a new Cuba.

At the end of July this year, a few days before the latest elections, another big lie began making the rounds in Venezuela through the national and international media. The Venezuelan connection of the Cuban American National Foundation had been hatching a conspiracy. It was said: "A Cuban defector denounces the presence in Venezuela of 1500 members of the Cuban Intelligence services who have infiltrated the military and roam the streets..." A host of other alleged details were added. This infamous campaign was so well and timely planned to coincide with the eve of the presidential elections that even senior government officials spoke of the lies said by "the Cuban defector"; that is, they were taking for granted that a Cuban intelligence officer had defected. There was never such a defector. He was simply a loafer who had left Cuba years before and wanted asylum and protection. The conspirators already had five or six others like him to repeat the story and the scandal day after day, through the same mechanism, up until Election Day.

Once again Cuba had been involuntarily dragged into Venezuela's electoral process; again there was the need to set the record straight for the press of this sister nation. The swift exposure and dismantling of the gruesome story had the effect of tearing the slander to pieces.

On that occasion, I also described the generous flow of funds coming from Miami to pay for the electoral campaign against President Chávez. I offered accurate data and disclosed a few indispensable names. They all denied it, of course. One of them, a past government official reputed as well educated and efficient, swore that he was absolutely innocent of the role attributed to him. I avoided a reiteration of what we had indicated although I had then, and I still do, accurate information about where they met, the place where he received half a million US dollars, who brought that amount to Venezuela and who delivered the money to the final payees. I did not really wish to go back over that murky and disgusting affair. It was not even necessary. Those involved in the conspiracy had been crushed by the people's vote on July 30. The information could be kept in reserve in case it became necessary to use it any time in the future.

Cuba is continually being used as an element in Venezuela's domestic politics; they keep trying to use it to attack Chávez, an indisputable and outstanding leader and follower of Bolívar's ideas, whose actions and prestige exceed the boundaries of his Homeland.

I am his friend and I take pride in it. I admire his courage, his honesty and his clear vision of the problems in today's world as well as of the extraordinary role that Venezuela is called to play in Latin American unity and in the struggles of the Third World countries. And, I am not saying this now because he is the President of Venezuela; I could guess who he was even as he was in prison. Only a few months after his release I invited him to Cuba, where he was properly welcome, running the risk that the owners of power could sever relations with the island. I introduced him to the University students whom he addressed at the Main Hall of the University of Havana, and he was met with great enthusiasm.

His resounding popular victory obtained four years later --penniless, lacking the handsome resources of the old political clique whose campaigns were funded with large amounts of money stolen from the people-- only with the power of his ideas, his capacity to convey them to the masses and the support of small organizations of Venezuela's most progressive forces marked the end of his adversaries. Thus, a remarkable opportunity was born not only for this country but for our hemisphere as well.

I have never asked anything from him. I never appealed to him to include my homeland, criminally blockaded for more than four decades, in the San José Pact. On the contrary, I always offered Cuba's modest cooperation in any area that could be of use to Venezuela. It was entirely his idea, and I heard it for the first time when he publicly addressed the issue at a Summit of the Association of Caribbean States held in the Dominican Republic on April 1999. There, he expressed his wishes that several Caribbean nations, which had not been part of the agreement, be included. His profound identification with Bolívar's thought has inspired him to act as a bridge between Latin America and the principled Caribbean countries.

I am aware that my visit to Venezuela has been the target of all sorts of poisonous campaigns. President Chávez has been accused of wanting to give us oil for free and of using the Caracas Pact as a simple pretext to help Cuba. If that were the case he would deserve a monument as high as Mount Everest because Cuba was isolated, betrayed and blockaded by every government in this hemisphere --except Mexico-- as they were subdued to the United States, including that of Venezuela led by its first constitutional President after the popular uprising of January 23, 1958 and the inception of the Patriotic Junta which headed the elections that same year.

Despite the blockades, the dirty war, the mercenary invasions and the threats of direct attacks, our people honorably defended their Homeland in the frontline of the Americas as Martí had foreseen it when, on the eve of his death in combat, he confessed that everything he had done in his life was "...to timely prevent with the independence of Cuba that the United States could expand over the Antilles and fall with that additional force over our American lands."

None of those accusing Chávez in Venezuela of such intents has ever waged any battle against the efforts to kill the Cuban people of hunger and diseases, something that can only be qualified as genocide. They seem to forget that when the oil prices were exceedingly low and Venezuela's economic situation was critical, it was Chávez who reinvigorated and spirited the OPEC whose actions have tripled the prices in less than two years.

It is true that today's prices, perfectly tolerable for the industrial and wealthy nations, are exacting a heavy toll from over one hundred Third World countries, to a higher or lesser degree, while Venezuela's incomes and those of the other oil producing countries have grown considerably. This is something that Chávez tried to compensate with the Caracas Pact which, as you know, offers a group of Central American and Caribbean nations facilities to pay part of the price on credit, with low interest rates and on long term basis. That is a good example that other oil exporting countries would do well to imitate.

Those contesting him on this smart and fair step, which involves only a small portion of Venezuela's incomes obtained due to the current high prices, are exhibiting an extremely selfish and shortsighted reaction. They overlook the fact that without the support of the Third World nations, the OPEC would be in no position to withstand for long the enormous pressures of the industrial and wealthy countries basically affected by the increase in the price of gasoline for their billions of cars and other motor vehicles. They certainly show no concern for the environment and the economic difficulties of the less fortunate nations.

On the other hand, they pretend to ignore that our country has resisted and struggled with marked stoicism and an iron will during ten awful years of a special period. After loosing its markets and sources of varied supplies, our homeland performed the exploit of not only surviving but also graduating more medical doctors, teachers, professors, physical education and sports trainers per capita than any other country worldwide at the same time it raised other human and social rates higher than those of many industrial and wealthy countries. Cuba's social development constitutes an example for many but it is also the focus of the hegemonic power's hatred and anger as it is an unequivocal proof of what a united and revolutionary people can do with little resources.

The enemies and slanderers seemingly ignore that Cuba is rapidly increasing its oil production and that, in a relatively short period, it will be self-reliant in oil and gas. The cooperation that Cuba will receive from Venezuela in the area of energy, by providing advanced technology leading to higher levels of extraction and the use of our own petroleum, will indeed be of invaluable assistance. On the other hand, the oil supplied under the conditions set forth in the documents to be signed in compliance with the Caracas Pact, will be rigorously paid for in hard currency as well as in goods and services which will doubtlessly prove of great value to the Venezuelan people.

Our cooperation with Venezuela is inspired in ideals much more transcendental than trade exchanges between the two countries. We share a mutual awareness of the need to unite the Latin American and Caribbean nations and to struggle for a world economic order that brings more justice to all peoples. This is no written Pact but rather a community of objectives expressed in our common actions at the United Nations Organization, the Group of 77, the Non-Aligned Movement and other relevant international fora.

The community of purpose of both countries in the international political arena is eloquently expressed in their rejection of neoliberal policies and their willingness to strive for economic development and social justice.

Those so fiercely bent on lying, slandered and conspiring against the exemplary relations between our two countries, who have tried to jeopardize the Cuban delegation's official visit and to distort the meaning of economic cooperation between Cuba and Venezuela, should explain to the Venezuelan people why is it that in a country with huge economic resources and an industrious and intelligent people poverty engulfs an incredible 80% of the population.

I will limit myself to a few examples.

According to sources from ECLA and the Andean Community, the poor sectors, which a decade ago already concentrated 70% of the population, eight years later, grew to 77%, particularly absolute poverty, which climbed from 30 to 38 percent. Meanwhile, unemployment has reached 15.4% and precarious employment in the informal sector involves 52% of the labor force.

Previous official data showed illiteracy rates fewer than 10%. Presently, official sources of the Venezuelan Ministry of Education estimate that real illiteracy is affecting 20% of the population.

Fifty percent of students drop out from school for economic reasons, 11% due to poor school performance and 9% for lack of opportunities. These figures add up to 70% of affected students.

Only in the last 21 years, the capital outflow from Venezuela amounted to 100 billion US dollars, a real drain of financial resources indispensable for the country's economic and social development.

Data provided by various sources, not always coincidental, are really overwhelming. It would be impossible to cite all the calamities inherited by the Bolivarian Revolution, although one should inescapably be mentioned as it offers virtually mathematical evidence of all the others: it is infant mortality, an extremely sensitive human and social issue.

The UNICEF data indicate that in 1998 infant mortality among children under one year of age in Venezuela was 21.4 per 1000 live births, but grew to 25 when children up to the age of five were included. How many Venezuelan children would have survived if following the political process initiated in 1959, almost simultaneously with the Cuban Revolution, infant mortality had been reduced in Venezuela at the pace and to the degree that it was reduced in Cuba, from an estimated 60 to 6.8 for the first year of life and from 70 to 8.3 among children under five?

The data show that in the 40 years period between 1959 and 1999, a total of 365,510 children died in Venezuela whose lives could have been saved. In Cuba, whose population in 1959 was hardly 7 million, the Revolution has saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of children by reducing infant mortality rates which today are better than those of the United States of America, the wealthiest and most developed nation the world over. None of these children is an illiterate by the age of seven and tens of thousands of them are already qualified technicians or university graduates.

Only in the year 1998, which marked the end of the nefarious stage that preceded the Bolivarian Revolution, 7951 children, whose lives could have been saved, died in Venezuela in their first year of life, a figure that grows to 8833 if children under five are also included. In all cases I have used the exact figures as officially reported by UN agencies.

The number of Venezuelan children dead in a year is thus higher than the soldiers from both sides fell in the battles of Boyacá, Carabobo, Pichincha, Junín and Ayacucho, five of the most important and decisive battles fought during the independence wars waged by Bolívar, according to well known historical data even if, for tactical reasons, the victors altered the figures in their war reports overstating the enemy casualties and hiding their own.

Who killed those children? Which of the culprits was sent to jail for that? Who was accused of genocide?

The tens of billions of dollars embezzled by corrupted politicians constitute genocide because the funds they steal from the public coffers cause the death of an incalculable number of children, adolescents and adults who perish from preventable and curable diseases.

However, that political and social order --truly murderous against the people whose protests are forcibly suppressed with real bullets and death-- is presented to the world public as a model of freedom and democracy.

The capital outflow is also genocide. When the financial resources of a Third World nation are transferred to an industrial nation, its reserves are depleted, the economy stagnates, unemployment and poverty grow, public health and education stand the brunt of the blow and that translates into pain and death. I rather avoid making estimates since the toll in material and human losses is higher than in a war. Is it fair? Is it democratic? Is it humane?

The face of that model of a social order can be seen in the outskirts of large cities in our hemisphere overflowing with marginal neighborhoods where dozens of millions of families live in subhuman conditions. None of that happens in Cuba, a blockaded and slandered country.

If it were not taken as an interference, I would permit myself to meditate and speak out my mind and I would say this: I have always felt that if Venezuela had had an efficient and honest administration in the

last 40 years, it could have achieved an economic development similar to that of Sweden. There is no possible justification for poverty and the social calamity reflected in official Venezuelan documents and reports and in respected international organizations' magazines. Actually, those who were leading this country when I first visited Parliament created the proper conditions for the unavoidable emergence of the current revolutionary process. Those who are longing for a return to the lost years will never again win the people's trust if the new generation of leaders in the country today pool their forces, close ranks and do everything within their capabilities. Is it possible to do it in the framework of the recently elaborated and approved political and constitutional model? Yes, I think it is.

The immense political and moral authority emanating from what the Bolivarian Revolution can do for the people would politically crush the reactionary forces while the revolutionary and patriotic culture and values that it would create in the Venezuelan people would render it impossible to return to the past.

Another perfectly logical but more complex question could also be asked: Can higher levels of justice than presently exist be attained in a market economy? I am a convinced Marxist and a socialist. I think that the market economy produces inequalities, selfishness, consumerism, wastage of resources and chaos and that a minimum planning of economic development and priorities is indispensable. But, I also feel that in a country with the huge resources of Venezuela, the Bolivarian Revolution can obtain, in half the time, 75% of what Cuba --a blockaded country with infinitely fewer resources than Venezuela-- has achieved since the victory of the Revolution.

I mean that this government could, in a few years, totally eradicate illiteracy and provide a first class education to all children, adolescents and youths and a high cultural level to most people; ensure excellent medical care to every person; create jobs for the youths; strike out embezzlement; reduce criminality to a minimum; and, provide decent housing to all Venezuelans.

A rational distribution of wealth, through an adequate taxation system, is possible in a market economy. Of course, that demands a total devotion to work by all members of the revolutionary forces. This is easily said but it can be an extremely hard and strenuous task. However, in my view, on a short term basis Venezuela would not have much choice. On the other hand, no less than 70% of the wealth here is state owned, as neoliberalism did not have enough time to give them all up to foreign capital, so there is no need for nationalization.

In the period we are going through, but progressively leaving behind, in Cuba today we have learned that a great number of variables are possible in the development of the economy and the solution of problems. It can be done if the state plays its role putting first the interests of the nation and the people.

We have accumulated much experience in the practice of doing a lot with little resources and having a strong political and social impact. There is a solution for every problem and all obstacles can be overcome.

Being absolutely objective I should say that there is in Venezuela today only one man who can lead such a complex process, and that is Hugo Chávez. His death, either intentional or accidental, would terminate that possibility and bring about chaos. By the way, since I have come to this point and as I have come to know him somewhat, I must say that he does not contribute to his own security since he is reluctant to even a minimum of adequate measures. You can help him, and also his friends and his people, persuading him to be more cooperative. You should not have any doubts that his adversaries, both external and domestic, will try to have him physically removed. This I say because I have been through the peculiar experience of being the target of over six hundreds such attempts carried through to various degrees of completion. An Olympic record!

I know that enemy only too well; I know how they think and act. This trip to Venezuela is no exception. I am aware that once again they have toyed with the idea of finding a possibility to carry to the end their

so far thwarted designs. But, that is not important. Contrary to the present situation of the Venezuelan process, in Cuba there has always been and will forever be somebody, actually many, who can take up my work. Furthermore, I have lived many happy years of struggle and I have seen a good part of my dreams come true. I am not like Chávez, a young lively leader with great tasks still to undertake. He should take care of himself.

I have honored my word. I have spoken with absolute honesty, avoiding excessive diplomacy or affectation. I have talked to you as a friend, as a brother, as a Cuban, as a Venezuelan.

I am deeply appreciative for your generous attention.

Ever onward to victory!

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