

[Speech delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the Cuban solidarity rally held in Riverside Church, Harlem, New York, September 8, 2000 \[1\]](#)

Date:

08/09/2000

Dear sisters and brothers from the Reception Committee;

Dear sisters and brothers present here;

Dear sisters and brothers in the nearby room;

Dear sisters and brothers listening to us from outside on the street, since many were not able to get into this church hall:

You have been extremely generous and kind to me.

When a few questions were posed here that you responded associated to efforts we have made for the benefit of our children and all our people and the efforts we have also made for other children and other peoples in various parts of the world --things which we never mention for there is no need to-- something occurred to me. I thought, all of this actually has a name, and it is "violation of human rights," (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) which is used in an attempt to justify a blockade and economic war that have now gone on for more than 40 years.

Also, when you sang "Happy Birthday," it brought many things to mind, and it occurred to me that perhaps it would have been more fitting to say, "Happy Good Luck, Fidel."

It is a miracle that I have lived this many years (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS), and not because we spent a number of years fighting against the tyranny in our country, or for having participated in some war actions but rather because of everything that came after the triumph of the Revolution. They say that a word to the wise is enough (APPLAUSE), and you are not only wise but noble and intelligent, too.

On my way here, I recalled my four visits to the United Nations. The first time, I was thrown out of the hotel near the United Nations. I had two choices: pitching a tent in the United Nations courtyard --and as a guerrilla fighter who had recently come down from the mountains, it would not have been all that difficult for me (APPLAUSE)-- or heading for Harlem, where I had been invited to stay in one of its hotels. (APPLAUSE) I immediately decided: "I will go to Harlem because that is where my best friends are." (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS)

(SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE SHOUTS, "My house is your house.") (APPLAUSE)

Thank you very much. That is what they used to say to me in many beautiful homes where very wealthy people lived. They had those little signs that read exactly like that. Later, when we did something to help the poor they definitely removed the signs. (APPLAUSE) However, in you I can sense the generosity of the humble.

When I came back the second time, in 1979, I do not remember right now exactly what I did; all I remember is that I spoke there on behalf of all the poor countries of the world. The third time I came back to Harlem, and not only to Harlem, but also to the Bronx (APPLAUSE), as someone said here tonight.

This time I have been honored with an invitation to this neighborhood that I believe is called Riverside. Is that right? (SOMEONE ANSWERS, "Yes.") From what I can understand, I am beside a river (LAUGHTER); but at the same time, I am in the middle of a river, a river of the purest and loftiest friendship. (APPLAUSE)

I am sure you can understand that it is not easy for me to visit New York; there is more than enough proof of that. This time it was definitely not easy, and many of my compatriots were very worried. We are living in a special period, and I do not mean the special period in Cuba, which has been brought about by the double blockade, but rather the special period of presidential elections. (LAUGHTER) And I have received all kinds of threats, from killing me to sending me to a U.S. prison.

However, that was a very important meeting. They called it the Millenium Summit, and we truly are beginning a millenium full of uncertainties. What's more, for those of us who believe that the 20th century ends this December 31, humanity is about to begin the 21st century in extremely difficult and extremely troubling conditions. I could not fail to attend for any reason, and believe me when I say that I felt very happy when I got on the plane, after the complicated procedures needed to obtain a visa.

As you know, comrade Alarcón came here with us. (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) He was supposed to attend a conference of chairmen or Speakers of legislative assemblies or Parliaments from all countries in the world. He had applied for a visa almost a month earlier and been turned down, but was finally granted a visa at the same time as me --since he was part of the summit delegation-- around 24 or 48 hours before the trip. I should add that I have been treated very well at all times and that the U.S. security staff assigned to us have been very cordial and highly efficient, so it is only right to acknowledge this. (APPLAUSE)

We were given five minutes to speak at the meeting. As I am sure you understand, that is very little time to address encyclopedic problems or rather an encyclopedic list of problems, but I did my homework and managed to speak for only seven minutes and three seconds. (APPLAUSE) I ended up as one of those who spoke the least.

I have come here tonight after having gone through this training (SHOUTS), but I know that you will allow me more than seven minutes and three seconds. (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS)

I draped a handkerchief over the little lights that signal the time, and I did it for two reasons. Firstly, it was a sort of protest against the fact that Heads of State and Government are subjected to the torture of a yellow light coming on first and then a red light to signal that their five minutes are over; nothing happens after that but it is humiliating. Secondly, I did it because I do not think that the speakers podium at the United Nations should be turned into a traffic light. (LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE)

Of course, because there are so many speakers the time should be limited so as to reduce the many inconveniences caused to the city of New York by staying gathered here for a week or even two weeks. Still, one would suppose that they are not preschool children, and so if things are told and explained to them, they can be very brief.

I have taken part in many meetings with very short time limits. There are always some who talk for far longer than the time allotted, with or without traffic lights. I have always tried to comply with the time-limit because the worst punishment for those who go on for too long is the restlessness of those waiting for their turn, and no matter how interesting the things they are saying may be, people will criticize them. It is not advisable to speak at length in that kind of meetings. Now, although we are not at the United Nations I intend to limit myself to some basic issues.

Why did I say that, in my view, that was a very important meeting? Because the world is suffering a truly catastrophic situation. Do not believe those experts who feign optimism, or those who ignore what is really happening in the world. I have irrefutable statistics about the situation in the Third World, in the countries where many of you come from, or countries that have been visited by many Americans where three-quarters of humanity live. I have brought a few papers along and chosen various statistics, which I will read.

I could say, for example, that in more than 100 countries, the per capita income is lower than it was 15 years ago.

In the Third World, there are 1.3 billion poor people. In other words, one out of every three inhabitants lives in poverty.

More than 820 million people in the world suffer from hunger; and 790 million of them live in the Third World.

More than 840 million adults are still illiterate and the vast majority live in the Third World.

At the moment of birth, an inhabitant of the Third World can expect to live 18 years less than another of the industrialized world.

Life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is barely 48 years. That is 30 years less than in the developed countries.

It is estimated that 654 million people living in countries of the South today will not live past 40 --almost half my age.

A full 99.5% of all maternal deaths take place in the Third World. The risk of maternal death in Europe is one death per 1400 births. In Africa the risk is one in six. I use the word risk because the number of those who actually die is lower, of course. But the number of mothers who die in Africa for every 10,000 births is no less than 100 times higher than the number in Europe.

More than 11 million boys and girls under five years of age die every year in the Third World from diseases that are largely preventable. That means more than 30,000 every day, 21 every minute, and almost a thousand since this rally began, about 45 minutes ago.

In the Third World, 64 children out of every 1000 born live die before reaching one year of age.

Two out of every five children in the Third World suffer from retarded growth, and one in every three is underweight for their age.

I said 64 out of every 1000 as an average for all the Third World countries, and that includes Cuba whose infant mortality rate is slightly under seven. But, there are numerous countries in Africa where more than 200 children out of every 1000 live births die every year before the age of five.

There are other terribly painful moral aspects such as the fact that two million girls are forced into prostitution and about 250 million children under the age of 15 are forced to work for a living.

Ten of the 11 new HIV positives occurring in the world every minute take place in sub-Saharan Africa, where the total number of people infected is now over 25 million.

And all of this is happening at a time when, throughout the world, 800 billion dollars are put into military spending, 400 billion are spent on narcotic drugs, and a trillion dollars are invested in commercial advertising.

By the end of 1998, the Third World's external debt amounted to 2.4 trillion dollars, that is, four times the total in 1982, only 18 years ago.

Between 1982 and 1998, these countries paid over 3.4 trillion dollars for debt servicing, in other words, almost a trillion dollars more than the current debt. Far from decreasing, the debt grew by 45% in those 16 years.

Despite the neoliberal discourse on the opportunities created by the open-trading system the underdeveloped countries, with 85% of the world's population, accounted for only 34.6% of world exports in 1998. That is less than in 1953, despite the fact that their population has more than doubled.

While flows of official development assistance in 1992 represented 0.33% of the developed countries' gross national product, by 1998, six years later, that percentage had dropped to 0.23%, far below the 0.7% goal set by the United Nations. Therefore, while the wealthy world is becoming increasingly wealthy, contributions to the development of the large number of poor people decrease every year. Solidarity and responsibility shrink further by the year.

On the other hand, the daily volume of the currency buying and selling transactions has reached a sum of approximately 1.5 trillion dollars. This figure does not include operations involving the so-called financial derivatives, which account for an almost equal additional sum. That is, some three trillion dollars worth of speculative operations are carried out every day. If a 1% tax were charged on all speculative operations, the amount raised would be more than enough for a sustainable development, with the necessary protection of nature and the environment in the so-called developing countries. Actually, these countries are headed down the path of growing and visible underdevelopment, since the gap between the rich and the poor countries is wider every day, as is the difference between the rich and the poor within countries.

I could ask you, for example, whether adding up the savings that all of you may have in the bank, big or small, would amount to even a thousandth of the wealth of the richest man in the world who, by the way, happens to be a citizen of this country.

I mentioned trillions of dollars in speculative operations every day: 3 trillion dollars. What does this have to do with world trade? All of the world trade as a whole totals 6.5 trillion dollars a year, which means that every two working days, speculative operations are realized on those stock markets that you hear so much about amounting to approximately the total of world trade operations in a year.

When those stock markets were created, the phenomena I have described did not exist. This is something totally new, and genuinely absurd. Speculative operations in which money is used to make money have absolutely nothing to do with the creation of material goods or services. This is a phenomenon that has developed uncontrollably over the last 30 years and is growing to ever more absurd heights every day. Can this frantic gambling be called economy? Can the genuine economy that should meet the vital needs of humankind withstand it?

Money is no longer used primarily in investments for the production of goods; it is used in currencies, stocks and financial derivatives in the desperate pursuit of more money, directly, through the most sophisticated computers and software and not through productive processes as was historically the case. This is what the much trumpeted and infamous process of neoliberal globalization has brought about.

The developed countries control 97% of all the patents in the world, of course, they have monopolized the finest minds on the planet. In the last 40 years, the industrialized countries have taken a million professionals away from Latin America and the Caribbean. I repeat, a million professionals! In the United States it would have cost 200 billion dollars to train all these people. Thus, the poor countries of the world supply the developed nations with the finest fruits of their universities.

I had some figures about this on a sheet of paper around here somewhere. I spoke about this at a round table in the United Nations. In the last 10 years, out of 22 Nobel Prize Laureates in physics, the United States attracted 19 and the same happens with Nobel prizes in medicine and other sciences. While knowledge is considered a major asset for development today, the Third World countries are constantly deprived of their best talents.

One last statistic, from a few I chose: barely 1% of the 56 billion dollars invested every year in medical research is spent on research into pneumonia, diarrheic diseases, tuberculosis and malaria, four of the primary scourges of the underdeveloped world.

The most advanced medicine used to add a few years to the lives of those faced with the tragedy of being HIV positives cost 10,000 dollars in the industrialized nations. This is what they charge for them although the actual production cost is approximately 1000 dollars.

We are well aware of the tragedies facing the world because one of our most sacred principles is that of solidarity. (APPLAUSE)

Those who do not believe in humankind, in its potential for noble sentiments, in its capacity for goodness and altruism, will never understand that we do not only hurt for every Cuban child who dies or suffers --we must not limit ourselves to only those who die --but also for every child in Haiti, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Africa and every country in the world. (APPLAUSE) It cannot be claimed that the human species has attained a maximum of consciousness while it is incapable of hurting for the suffering of others.

Actually, humanity will attain its maximum of consciousness and potential qualities when people feel the same sorrow for the death of any family's child as they would for their own child or other close relative. (APPLAUSE)

I know that many of you --perhaps the vast majority-- are Christians, and we are gathered together in a church. Well then, this is exactly what Christ preached, and this is what "Love thy neighbor" means to us. (APPLAUSE) This explains the efforts that Cuba has made for other countries to the extent of its capabilities. Some of these things were raised by you at the beginning of this rally.

There is a statistic that demonstrates this spirit of solidarity: about half a million of our compatriots have carried out internationalist missions in numerous countries in different parts of the world, especially in Africa (APPLAUSE), such as medical doctors, teachers, technicians, construction workers or soldiers. (APPLAUSE)

When many were investing in and trading with racist and fascist South Africa, tens of millions of voluntary soldiers from Cuba fought against the racist and fascist soldiers. (APPLAUSE)

Today, everyone speaks glowingly of the preservation of Angola's independence, although the country is still subjected to a brutal civil war. The fault lies with those who supplied the armed bandits for many years, among them, the apartheid government and other authorities whom I will not name out of respect for where I am right now. (APPLAUSE)

Those half million volunteers who carried out their mission for free did not go there to invest in oil, diamonds, minerals or in any of the country's other riches. (APPLAUSE)

Cuba does not have a single investment in any of the countries where our internationalists fulfilled their duty (APPLAUSE); it does not have a single dollar of capital invested, and does not own a single square meter of land. (APPLAUSE)

Amílcar Cabral, a great African leader, (APPLAUSE) once made a prophetic statement that was an

unforgettable honor for us: "When the Cuban soldiers go home, all they will take with them are the remains of their dead comrades." (PROLONGED APPLAUSE)

Nobody blockaded the obnoxious apartheid regime. Nobody waged economic warfare against it. There were no Torricelli or Helms-Burton Acts against that fascist and racist regime. Yet, all these laws and measures have been adopted against Cuba, a country that always has and always will be dedicated to solidarity.

Simply by reducing infant mortality in our country from approximately 60 deaths per 1000 live births in the first year of life to less than 7 per 1000, we have saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. We have protected the health of all children free of charge and guaranteed a life expectancy of over 75 years. (APPLAUSE) Moreover, we have not only preserved lives but also guaranteed free education for all (APPLAUSE), and not a selfish and mediocre education but one based on solidarity and excellence.

A study carried out by UNESCO, a UN agency, revealed that our children possess almost twice as much knowledge as the average child in the rest of Latin America. (APPLAUSE)

We have also saved the lives of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of children in Africa and other parts of the Third World throughout the years of the Revolution, and we have provided health care for tens of millions of people. Over 25,000 health care workers have taken part in these internationalist efforts. (APPLAUSE) This is called a "violation of human rights," and it is why we must be destroyed.

Our Revolution has a history. I would have absolutely no moral right to be speaking here now if a single Cuban had been murdered by the Revolution at some point throughout these 40-plus years, if there were a single death squad in Cuba, if a single person in Cuba had been vanished. And I will go even further: if a single person in our country had been tortured --mark my words-- if a single person had been tortured in our country. And the Cuban people are very much aware of this. (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) They are a rebellious people with a very high sense of justice. They would not have forgiven us a single one of the acts I have mentioned (APPLAUSE) and these people have followed the Revolution throughout more than 40 years.

Also, with exemplary courage they have withstood 41 years of a blockade enforced by successive governments of the most powerful country in the world in political, economic, technological and military terms. Furthermore, for the last 10 years, they have withstood the double blockade that resulted from the collapse of the socialist bloc and the USSR. We were left without markets and without a source of supplies of food, fuel, raw materials and many other essential products that we paid for with our earnings, and in order to pay, of course, we needed to trade. If nobody buys anything from a country, that country will not have anything with which to buy from those who deprive it of earnings.

Perhaps a day will come when history will recount how Cuba worked the miracle of withstanding all of this (APPLAUSE); but in the meantime, I can assure you that no other country in Latin America and the Caribbean would have been able to do it.

This country, where we are right now, is one of the few countries in the world that could be almost totally self-sufficient in terms of the basic elements for maintaining life. But, the same cannot be said of a small isolated country, or a medium-sized country or even a large country in Latin America. None would have been able to withstand this for even two weeks, and we have withstood it for 10 years. (APPLAUSE) And for several years now, little by little, we have managed not only to survive but also to gradually increase our economic production, although we have still not bounced back to the rates we had before the double blockade that forced us into what we call the special period.

Suffice it to say that a daily caloric intake of 3000, more or less evenly spread, was reduced overnight to 1800 calories. It now stands at around 2400 calories.

But not even that stopped us from doing what we should. Throughout these ten years, we added 30,000 new doctors to our health care network and we have not closed a single clinic, or a school or a classroom. (APPLAUSE)

Our country has never been subjected to those so-called economic shock policies that wipe out hospitals, schools, social security and vital resources for low income people. We have resisted and not a single one of those measures was ever used, and those that we did implement to confront this terribly difficult situation were discussed with all of the people, not just in our National Assembly. We do have a National Assembly --even though many people ignore it-- characterized by a democratic spirit that fills us with pride because it is the neighbors who put up the candidates, nominate them for delegates of their districts and elect them by direct and secret ballot. No candidate is nominated by the party. They are all freely nominated by the district residents --no more than eight and no less than two candidates from whom one is chosen-- and elected on the basis of their own merits and capacity.

These district delegates make up the municipal assemblies and these municipal assemblies, established at the grass roots level, nominate the candidates to delegates of the provincial assemblies and the deputies to the National Assembly. These delegates must also be elected by direct and secret ballot and must obtain over 50% of the votes cast.

Almost half of that National Assembly --of which Alarcón is the Speaker and other comrades in the delegation whom I can see from up here are members-- is made up of these district delegates who are, as I have explained, nominated and elected by the people, with no intervention by our Party. The only role played by the Party is to guarantee the observation of the procedures set forth in our Constitution and our laws for the electoral process.

Nobody needs to spend a penny, not a single one. (APPLAUSE) The district candidates campaign together as a group, as do the candidates to the National Assembly who are nominated in every municipality, proportionally to the size of each municipality, although every one must have a minimum of two deputies in the National Assembly. This is the procedure, the method we have developed to guarantee the democratic principle.

Yet, as I was telling you, when we adopted measures to confront the difficult situation of the special period all were discussed, first of all, at the grass-roots level, with workers, farmers, students and other mass organizations, at hundreds of thousands of assemblies and later at the National Assembly. Then, after they had been studied by the National Assembly, they were sent back to the grass-roots level for further discussion before their final adoption by the Assembly.

These measures protected everyone and guaranteed social security for all. Among the main measures adopted were taxes on alcohol, cigarettes and other sumptuary items. Medicines, food or other essential products were never taxed and despite everything, we still could ensure a liter of milk a day for every child up to the age of seven. (APPLAUSE) And do you know how much the population had to pay for that liter of milk? According to the official exchange rate, 1.5 cents of a U.S. dollar, one and a half cents.

We still have a ration card and we will maintain it for a number of foodstuffs. But a pound of rice, which costs between 12 and 15 cents on the world market, --without including the cost of transportation from distant places, since we cannot buy it from the country closest to us, and without including the cost of internal transport, distribution and the rest-- is sold to consumers for just under one and a half cents. (APPLAUSE) And a pound of beans is sold for the same price as a liter of milk, 1.5 cents of a dollar.

In our country, the vast majority of citizens pay 0 cents of a dollar for the homes they live in (APPLAUSE), because today, as a result of the revolutionary laws, over 85% of homes are owned by the families who live in them (APPLAUSE), and they do not even pay taxes on them. In the remaining homes, located in out-of-the-way places deemed essential for industry or services, the tenants pay an extremely low rent or are granted usufruct of them. That is why when people say that someone earns 15 or 20 dollars a month in Cuba, I say that you have to add X amount for what they would have to pay

for housing if they lived in New York, X number of dollars for the cost of education, another X number of dollars for health care, and other rising costs. I am not saying that we are not poor, or that we do not have needs; but we have distributed our poverty or resources as fairly as possible. (APPLAUSE)

I will offer two or three more examples. To watch an important baseball game in Baltimore, for example, according to our experience costs an average of 19 dollars; at the current exchange rate, it would cost a Cuban five cents of a dollar. Going to a movie in New York costs between six and eight dollars, as you know, but in Cuba it costs five cents of a dollar. Visiting a museum --for those who pay because children do not pay-- costs our people five cents of a dollar. This is why we have been able to withstand such difficult circumstances despite the crisis, although there are still many things we lack.

The prices of basic medicines are the same they were in 1959, over 40 years ago. (APPLAUSE) At that time they were cut by half because one of the first things the Revolution did was to lower the price of medicines and those who are administered these medicines in a hospital do not pay a penny for them. (APPLAUSE) And if they need a heart transplant, a liver transplant, other transplants or costly operations or treatments, they do not pay a penny.

This is what the Revolution did for the people. This is what forged the heroism with which our people endured the tremendous hardships never before withstood by any other country throughout more than 40 years of blockade, of which the last 10 years were characterized by the conditions I have explained to you. Therefore, it is only natural that the very United States recognizes that the healthiest young people who migrate to the United States, one way or another, are the Cubans. In addition, they have higher qualification than immigrants from any other country in Latin America or the Caribbean. (APPLAUSE)

I feel it is my duty to explain these things to you, without straying even an iota from the truth, since you have so steadfastly shown your solidarity with our country in the face of so much deception and lies.

Now then, our internationalist spirit has not falter in the slightest during the special period. It is true that we had to reduce the number of scholarships for foreign students, whose numbers reached 24,000 in the 1980s. We were the country with the highest number of foreign students per capita, among all countries in the world (APPLAUSE), and we did not charge them a single penny.

There are tens of thousands of professionals and technical workers in Africa who studied and graduated in Cuba. I mention Africa, although there were also students from many other countries, but they primarily came from the world's poorest continent. Their numbers decreased during this past decade.

We also inevitably had to cut back for a few years on our programs to support health care efforts in other countries. But I can now say, with great satisfaction, that today we have more doctors and health care workers providing free services in the Third World than at any previous time. (APPLAUSE)

I would like to make a few brief comments on this subject. After Hurricane George --I do not know why they named it after one of the forefathers of independence in the United States and its first president-- caused great devastation and killed many people, we offered Haiti, the poorest country in our hemisphere, all of the doctors it needed. (APPLAUSE) Then the same thing happened a few weeks later in Central America with Hurricane Mitch, which brought sweeping rains associated to climatic changes. These were particularly destructive because the forests had been cut down to export timber to the wealthy countries. We offered the same thing to the Central American countries as we did to Haiti, and immediately sent hundreds of doctors and proposed the development of comprehensive health care programs.

We felt it was not simply a matter of sending a number of doctors, helping out for two or three weeks after the hurricane and then leaving, because this hurricane had killed over 30,000 people, according to the highest estimates made at the time. Perhaps the actual number of deaths was around 15,000, since many of those who were missing eventually showed up. We already knew that over 40,000 children die

of preventable diseases every year in Central America; I will not even mention the number of adults. This is like an ongoing quiet hurricane, --much more devastating than Hurricane Mitch-- that kills three times as many children every single year as the number killed by Hurricane Mitch, and nobody even talks about it.

The countries of Central America accepted our doctors, primarily those who acted independently; some were prohibited from accepting. The health care programs that were set up at that time are in operation.

Currently, there are about 450 Cuban doctors and health care workers, --including a few technicians to operate the equipment and a few specialized nurses, although almost all of them are doctors-- in the most isolated locations of one of these countries where there are snakes, mosquitoes and no electricity.

These programs are working and expanding. We do not provide the medicines because we do not have them. The medicines are supplied by the governments of the countries involved and some non-governmental organizations. But, our doctors' services are supplied absolutely free of charge (APPLAUSE).

Today there are several hundred Cuban doctors in Haiti --approximately the same number as in the other country-- who provide medical care to over four million people. There is also a group of Cuban specialists in the country's main hospital and in other hospitals where there were not enough specialists, and they treat people from any part of the country who need it. They have saved many lives.

Obviously, saving lives is not so difficult if you follow the simple strategy of immunization with vaccines that cost a few cents. And of course, the same is true if you apply the kind of health care policies that permit lives to be saved and people to be cured at a minimal cost. The lives of millions of children who die in the Third World could be saved for just pennies.

We offered Central America about 2000 doctors and Haiti as many doctors as it needed. But that was not all we did. Following cuts to our military spending, we founded a medical school in Cuba at what used to be a major military facility, a former defense school. There, about 1000 Central American youth from distant regions and humble backgrounds are studying medicine. (APPLAUSE) First, they do six months of premed studies to level them off followed by two years of basic sciences at that same school. They will then go on to four years of studies in any of our country's 20 medical schools which, combined with the basic sciences schools, can currently accommodate 40,000 students.

There were years in which 6000 students entered these medical schools but that number was subsequently reduced. Now these schools are used to train not only doctors but also university-graduate nurses and hospital technicians, as well as dentists.

The new school I have described now has over 3000 students. In a few months, when the new school year begins --in some countries high school classes finish in the fall while in others they finish in the summer-- new students will enter the premed course. By March, another group of 1700 students will join bringing the total enrollment to approximately 5000 students. (APPLAUSE)

In three years there will be over 8000 Latin American medical students, who do not have to pay a single penny for their studies and are even provided with better food than the 40,000 Cuban university students on scholarships.

At the moment there are also 80 students at the school from Equatorial Guinea, a Spanish-speaking country.

This is a full program called the Latin American School of Medical Sciences, but it is not limited to the building where basic sciences and premed courses are taught. The program includes all the medical schools spread throughout the country.

I have not said that in Santiago de Cuba we have more than 200 Haitian students. They are excellent students. They have finished their premed and begun their medical studies. Every year they will be joined by about 80 new students. I have also not included the young medical students from the Caribbean who are studying at the medical school in Cienfuegos. At the moment there must be over 4000 students from Latin America and the Caribbean studying medicine in Cuba, and that is a conservative estimate. Soon there will be 10,000. (APPLAUSE) Our country has done this in spite of the blockade and at absolutely no cost to the students who are provided with adequate food and living quarters, laboratory equipment, textbooks and clothing; and other costs are covered as well, such as transportation to and from the school.

The invitation was opened to students from all over Latin America as a way to promote unity, brotherhood, and cultural exchange.

The school has cultural groups representing each country. The students will leave with considerable knowledge about the other countries of the region. Above all, the idea is to create a new concept, a new concept on the role of doctors in society because in the capitals and other big cities of Latin America there are more than enough doctors, but they have not all been educated about the real duties of a doctor. (APPLAUSE) The number of students is not as important as the ideas that guide this program.

You cannot imagine how eagerly these students apply themselves to their studies, how dedicated they are, even more so than our own students, who are as used to having these opportunities as to seeing the sun rise every day. The Latin American students come from very poor regions and studying medicine was a dream. The results have been excellent. These schools will turn out excellent doctors! The effort they put into their studies is more than enough compensation for us.

What are we doing in Africa? It would be impossible to bring tens of thousands of Africans to Cuba. You see, to have one doctor for every 4000 people, Africa would need about 160,000 doctors. Cuba has one doctor for every 168 people, and 2000 new doctors graduate every year.

In order for sub-Saharan Africa to have one doctor to 1000 people, there would have to be approximately 596,000 doctors. How are they going to train them? What is the solution we have implemented through the Comprehensive Health Care Programs for Africa? We have 3000 doctors available for sub-Saharan Africa. Their first task is to immediately open a medical school wherever one is needed. (APPLAUSE) They do this by inviting high school graduates and offering a six-month upgrading course. We have just done this in The Gambia, where 158 Cuban doctors are working. (APPLAUSE) They asked us for 90 more, and we provided them. This was the first country in Africa where the comprehensive health care program was initiated. They had 30 Gambian doctors for a population of 1,200,000.

The second country was Equatorial Guinea where over 100 Cuban doctors are already working and have established a medical school.

We had established a medical school in Guinea-Bissau many years ago, but it was destroyed in a recent civil war with foreign intervention. They have not been able to rebuild it yet, but they asked us if the fifth and sixth year students could continue their studies in Cuba. They were immediately admitted (APPLAUSE), but because the rebuilding of the school has been delayed, they asked us a few weeks ago if we could take the first, second, third and fourth year students as well. We told them, "Send them over right away." Thus, all these students will be able to continue their studies. This is how we work.

There is a need to train hundreds of thousands of African doctors and nobody cares to do anything about it. There is a very wealthy part of the world that is only interested in oil, diamonds, minerals, forests, natural gas, cheap labor, and nothing else. As a result, the situation in that hemisphere is much worse today than in colonial times, much worse! The population has grown many times over. The situation is dreadful.

Yesterday, at the United Nations they were discussing AIDS. That is a whole other subject. If you will allow me, I will talk about it later. (APPLAUSE)

Why have I spent so much time on the subject of medicine? I will explain. We have offered all the Caribbean countries free university scholarships, for all those who apply in any field of study. There are many countries in the Caribbean but the total population is not large. They speak English.

I recently learned something that really amazed me. We were visited by some members of the Congressional Black Caucus --I am talking about this because they mentioned it to the press but it is the first time I discuss it publicly-- and as I was telling a lawmaker from Mississippi about these programs he said: "Listen, there are a lot of places in my district where there isn't a single doctor." I said, "What! Ah, now I see: you people are the Third World of the United States." (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) And I said: "We are prepared to send you a few doctors free of charge, the same as we do for other countries of the Third World."

I suddenly realized the way things really are. You always hear about how wealthy the United States is, about its gross domestic product of over eight trillion dollars, and so on, and suddenly there I was talking to a respected member of the U.S. House of Representatives who said that there are not enough doctors in his district. That is why I said, "We can send doctors." And remembering the schools I immediately added, "And there is something more: listen, we are prepared to grant a number of scholarships to poor youth in your district who cannot afford to pay the 200,000 dollars it costs to get a university degree." (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) When they got back to the United States they discussed this matter, and they have told us that they are studying the question of scholarships, because there are always problems of compatibility among the professional training systems in different countries.

I assured them that our doctors have excellent training. They begin to have contact with community doctors and polyclinics from the very first year, and their six years of medical school include not only theoretical studies with excellent professors but also practical experience. They are constantly in contact with hospitals. Our 20 medical schools --there are actually 22, but two of them are for basic sciences-- were built near the country's most important hospitals in every province. They do their internships and study their specialties right there, so they do not need to leave the provinces to study in the country's capital.

The member of the U.S. House of Representatives said to me that other minorities face the same situation and he told to me about the Chicanos, about the Indian reservations and about other parts of the country, and he meant not only to Latinos and immigrants but also to people born in the United States. I said, "Your country is very big, enormous, and we would not be able to do what we do in other countries. I do not know how many people there are in your Third World but I imagine that there must be about 30 or 40 million." (APPLAUSE)

Do you want to hear something? We have enough doctors for quite a few million people, but I did not dare to offer more because we have a lot of commitments, so I said, "This will not solve your huge problem but I am sure that if you need doctors and request visas for these doctors to go there, the authorities could not possibly turn them down. Otherwise, how could they justify the thousands of doctors they have stolen from us, the 3000 they took away in the first years of the Revolution --half of the 6000 doctors we had at the time, a full half!-- and more than half of our university professors. We were actually left with only 3000 patriotic doctors (APPLAUSE), and with them we developed our plans and took on the challenge. Today we have 67,500 doctors (APPLAUSE), over 20 for every doctor they took from us in the early years. This is the result of tenacity and the determination to do things". (APPLAUSE)

And what is happening now? There is a policy to promote the defection of our doctors working in internationalist missions. Something happened a few weeks ago. We have 108 doctors working in provincial hospitals in Zimbabwe because they do not have enough doctors, since the apartheid regime

in Rhodesia did not train any black doctors. And so what was once Rhodesia, and is now the independent nation of Zimbabwe, after more than 20 years, has many hospitals with no doctors. We spread our doctors around and sent a team of at least eight or ten to almost every province: specialists in comprehensive general medicine, surgeons, orthopedic specialists, anesthesiologists, X-ray technicians, and other technicians to repair equipment. (APPLAUSE)

Two of these doctors defected, evidently taken in by the trillion dollars spent every year on advertising to exalt consumerism which always leads to the defection of a small percentage. It is an honor for our country to be able to say that only 1.6% of all those participating in these comprehensive health care programs have defected. Still, it hurts. (APPLAUSE)

These two headed nowhere else than the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Right away, the same characters who fought so hard in Congress to keep little Elián in the United States addressed the Administration to obtain visas for these two doctors. Nobody gave a thought to the children and sick people they had abandoned, those they were providing medical care for and the lives they were saving. The important thing was the publicity: "We snagged two Cuban doctors!" And the same has been done by the Cuban-American mob, which is the name we give to something that should never have been called a Foundation since it became a terrorist organization. (APPLAUSE AND SHOUTS) And now they are busy trying to do the same in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Haiti, Guyana, Paraguay, and in the 13 countries where these programs are currently in operation. We plan to extend them to roughly 30 or 40 countries, primarily in Africa. Who knows how many talents they will manage to steal!

I said to the U.S. Congressman: "How can they deny you the visas, on what grounds, where is the moral right if they are doing this kind of things?" (APPLAUSE)

Could it be that to send these doctors we will have to resort to using the Cuban Adjustment Act? We call it a murderous law because of the thousands of lives it claims due to the privileges that are not granted to people from any other country in Latin America or the world but only to Cubans, as a means of promoting destabilization, disorder, and fodder for anti-Cuban publicity.

We would not actually do this, of course. This is a serious matter. It is my hope that if a group of lawmakers from the Black Caucus or the Hispanic minority or representatives of the natives' community requested a number of doctors, who would not cost the taxpayers or the U.S. Treasury a penny, I believe that the U.S. government would not deny them a visa. That is what I think. I cannot see the logic of any other decision.

They will argue, as is only logical, about the training. I am absolutely certain that our doctors could be subjected to a rigorous examination by any fair tribunal, and they would successfully pass any tests needed to carry out this mission honorably.

It is easier to send medical students. They are already working on that and I can say here that we are prepared to accept 250 students a year from the United States' Third World. (APPLAUSE) They will learn Spanish as well, and they will get to know young people from all over the hemisphere to whom they will teach all they know about America and its culture and the others will teach them about theirs.

I already said a figure, 250 scholarships per year, but for the first premed course beginning in March we could offer 500 to include other minorities. We would not choose the candidates, they would be selected by the members of Congress who want to help poor young people in their districts to study medicine, and these young people would commit themselves to go back home after they graduate as doctors. (APPLAUSE)

Now I want to add a few things, and to keep you from becoming impatient I will say something at the end about the little boy Elián, and then I will conclude. I should see what time it is. (He looks at his watch) We have already been here quite some time, and I hope this will not go on much longer.

I was saying that the health situation in Africa is calamitous but the worst is that a new plague is threatening to exterminate entire nations on that continent, mark my words. Something else: it is threatening to wipe out the population of sub-Saharan Africa, that is, 596 million people.

This is a very serious issue that I am only addressing after much thought. I do not want to sound as an alarmist but I can tell you without reading from any papers that of the 35 million people in the world who are HIV positives, 25 million are African. Based on data I have from various sources but mostly from my conversations with the head of the UNAIDS program run by the United Nations, whose *raison d'être* is to deal with this problem, I can say that more than two million Africans are dying every year from AIDS and these include, as you might imagine, young people, mothers of childbearing age. And for every two that die, five more become infected. Nineteen million have already died, there are 12 million orphans, and it is estimated that in the next ten years this figure will reach 42 million. And there is a long way to go before a vaccine is found.

I wonder, how can a poor Third World country develop in a situation where 30% of the population is infected with AIDS and there is a shortage of doctors, medicines and infrastructure? How can 42 million orphan children be cared for? It is much distressing that a high percentage of the 19 million who have died are children infected at birth because, of course, many mothers are infected. How can these children be fed while there are so many undernourished and hunger prevails in many of these countries?

There was a meeting in Durban, South Africa, a few weeks ago and representatives from African countries and from industrialized nations spoke. They said that an effort had to be made to deal with this appalling problem. So I said to myself, they have just discovered AIDS in Africa, or it seems that they have just discovered it. They discussed what measures to take, what to do with the companies who manufacture the medicines so as to reduce their cost, and what little bit of money could be given to help. They discussed a billion, or a billion and something. Very well. But, they should know that if they cut down the price of each treatment that stops or begins to stop the development of the disease from 10,000 to 1,000 dollars, they would need 25 billion dollars annually. If the price were 5,000 dollars they would need 125 billion dollars, and at the current price they would need 250 billion dollars.

Now we will have to see how much they agree on, how long it will take them to implement a health program, how many more millions will become infected, how many more millions will die and how many more millions will add to the number of orphans.

I can assure you that with the cooperation of the industrial nations a basic problem could be solved, and that is what I was going to refer to when I spoke about something that has been raised by several African representatives. They said: "What is the point? What is the point if we do not have the infrastructure required to use these medicines?" They consist of a drugs cocktail to be administered at such and such a time and under such and such conditions. It is not an aspirin which one takes for a headache. I have thought a lot about this.

At yesterday's round table in the UN many African representatives addressed the AIDS issue, and recalling what was discussed in Durban I said: "If the industrial nations put up the money for the medicines, our country, thanks to the experience acquired through the work of tens of thousands of doctors in the Third World, could set up that infrastructure in one year to fight AIDS and other diseases. (APPLAUSE) And do not worry about politics because our doctors have strict instructions to follow, one rule above all: "Never to discuss politics, religion or philosophy". And they abide by that rule.

If there is a pastor of a Protestant church, they work with the pastor. The pastor does not want his children or his people to die, and he cooperates. He can be a lot of help in health programs, he can persuade the people to adopt a given measure. If they are with a pastor from another church, if he is a Muslim or a spiritual leader of an African religion, the same thing applies. They do not want the children to die. If it is a Catholic priest involved, exactly the same, he does not want the children or the families in the parish to die. Who could oppose that?

With the progress of such terrible epidemic, they will soon be unable to work, even produce food and the few hospital beds they have will not be enough because AIDS brings with it other terrible diseases.

To this health predicament we should add the hundreds of millions of cases of infection or re-infection with malaria, which kills one million people every year, and the three million who die from tuberculosis, a disease unquestionably linked to malnutrition and HIV. I have already said that only 1% of total world spending on health research programs is used to research tropical diseases.

The infrastructure could be useful to provide other medical services not only medication for AIDS. If there are medicines and vaccines to treat or prevent other diseases which affect many people, these diseases could be fought as well, services could be provided, and these are indeed fairly economical. We could send a minimum of 100 doctors to each of the countries in most need in sub-Saharan Africa.

Those doctors would organize the infrastructure, direct and train the young people. If they were assigned young 15-year-old assistants with a sixth-grade education, with the right books they could turn them into nurses in half the time needed in a nursing school. If they want to train orthopedic specialists, surgeons, or specialists in other fields of medicine, they could train them in half the time used in a residency in a hospital. So, those doctors could do much more than create the infrastructure: they could train tens of thousands of qualified personnel. In addition, they could open university schools of medicine in countries where they do not exist. Cuba would not charge a single penny for those services, nor wait years to implement them. (APPLAUSE)

They will say that there is no money. A little bit could be taken from the amount spent on advertising, which encourages consumption not only in developed societies but also among billions of people living in underdeveloped countries where they can have hardly any consumption. They could also take a small amount from military spending, which currently totals 800 billion dollars. (APPLAUSE)

They could release a worldwide issue of bonds and many good people who do not know about this could buy bonds as part of their contribution. One more thing: a small tax on speculative operations, and there would be more than enough money not just for that but practically enough to develop the whole Third World. It is necessary, it is absolutely crucial.

Why is it not done? Why do they talk so much about human rights when all these catastrophic things are happening in the world? Who is responsible for the death of tens of millions of people every year whose lives could be saved? There are children among that number --eleven million of those who die-- teenagers, young people and adults, who also die for lack of treatment or of some disease that was not treated timely or because of some malformation that could be mended, or because they needed surgery or an orthopedic operation after an accident. It is not known how many die who could be saved, or how many old people could live a little longer.

A person who lives 50 years --you know a lot of them and have many relatives like that-- would like to live 10 more years, 20 or 30 more years. And 70-year-olds would like to live five, eight or 10 more years, or people my age, 74, as you remembered today, would like to live four or five or even 10 more years to see how the world evolves and if any predictions come true.

Personally, I would like to have more time to benefit from the experience I have accumulated in the long time I have spent fighting in the service of the people. (APPLAUSE) My adversaries talk about "Castro in power for X number of years", "Castro's dictatorship", "Castro's tyranny", "Castro who is in power and does not want to step down", and a number of other things. If power is not used to do something good, it is absolutely worthless, and it would be crazy to want it. (APPLAUSE)

Anyway --as I have explained to many visitors-- I have very few constitutional and legal powers, the minimum. I do not appoint ambassadors. In every part of the world the President of the country appoints ambassadors, appoints ministers. I do not appoint ministers, I do not appoint anyone to any state office.

The ambassadors whose names are put forward are suggested by a commission which analyzes all candidates and submits their names to the 31 members Council of State, which must approve them and at the end, my job is to sign.

The same is true with pardons, or commutation of a death sentence, in the case of the highest penalty; these are discussed by the 31 members of the Council of State.

But, such power is not important to me, I do not need that. I think that a person who governs or a leader does not need the trappings of power, what he or she needs is moral authority, is moral power.
(APPLAUSE)

Only once in the course of 41 years were there some public disturbances in Havana, near the harbor. They were associated to announcements made by foreign radio stations in the sense that a number of boats would come from the United States close to Cuba to pick up immigrants. They knew that we did not shoot at or try to intercept boats in the sea with people on board. When speedboats from the United States began to come on smuggling operations, one of them came very close to the coastline east of Havana, and those keeping watch, taken by surprise by that unusual occurrence, told them to halt and shot at them; some people wounded, I do not know if anyone died.

Another time a tractor --it was pulling a cart with people in it towards the coast-- attempted to run over a police officer who stood in front of it and its partner who was with him fired shots. Some people were wounded and some died. That happened twice.

On another occasion a sand dredging boat was hijacked with crew members aboard --all this is encouraged by the Cuban Adjustment Act-- and a patrol boat fired some shots; luckily no one was hit.

Then, all coast guard forces and authorities were instructed: "Do not shoot at nor try to intercept any vessel with people on board who are trying to leave, even if it is in the middle of the harbor."

Even the Regla passenger ferry, which as many of you might know provides sea transportation between Old Havana and that other municipality, was the target of a hijacking. Someone went on board with a revolver who had several accomplices already there; they overpowered the skipper and left through the same port. Nobody laid a finger on them.

The famous incident they talk about involving the tugboat 13 de Marzo has its own history, which we know fully and in detail because we ordered an exhaustive investigation into it. There is a place where the tugboats that work the port are kept, that was assailed and those keeping watches were neutralized, communications destroyed and a tug stolen. Three people who worked there boarded another tugboat and another three or four --I do not have the exact numbers right now-- boarded a third one. This was at night and without saying anything to anyone they left with the two tugboats to try and intercept those who were escaping. No one knew anything; in fact, hours had gone by since the theft of the tug.

As soon as the relevant authorities learned of the event they issued immediate orders to the coast guards to sail towards the course the others had set to prevent an accident and to order the return of the tugboats, which had followed to try and intercept the first tug.

It was in the early hours of morning, there was a rough sea and big waves. Before a coast guard cutter reached the tug --it luckily saved almost half of those who were on the stolen vessel, since the coast guard had life vests, ropes and other equipment to aid and rescue shipwrecks-- one of the two tugs which were trying to intercept the first one crashed into the stern of the stolen tug, which then sunk. The few crewmembers on the other two tugs rescued several of the shipwrecked people despite the fact that they lacked the right equipment and were afraid of being kidnapped themselves. The coast guard boat soon arrived and even in those difficult conditions and the darkness of the night, they saved 25 people. That is the true story. Ah, but they had to invent lies and create a patently false myth around

the incident.

I assure you that I am not exaggerating, not altering the facts one iota. I would feel infinitely ashamed to try to justify any disgraceful act. That is not our way.

There must be many of those 1200 prisoners we took at the Bay of Pigs still in the United States. Not one of them can say that they were hit with a rifle butt, despite the fact that over 100 comrades had died and hundreds had been wounded. I was there, this is not something I was told, I was personally involved in taking prisoners. I even walked in front of an armed squadron of the invaders that was positioned behind one of the mangrove swamps --I was going along a road close to the shore-- they saw me, just a few meters away but did not fire.

There are moments in a battle when the enemy's morale completely deflates and no one fires any more shots. Later, during the trial, they claimed this as a merit, that is, to say in their favor that I walked in front of them who were armed with automatic weapons and they did not shoot on me. Well, thanks a lot! I really thank them for that. I would not have reached this age of 74, so I thank them. (APPLAUSE) But no one can say that they were mistreated and they had invaded our country, armed and sent by a foreign power.

If it had happened the other way around, you know that at the very least they would have been sentenced to life imprisonment. And over here it is not very easy for someone with a life sentence to be released because those Puerto Ricans who have been in prison for many years and were recently released (APPLAUSE) had a lot to suffer before seeing the fruit of a long solidarity struggle. I do not know the exact number of years that they were in prison, perhaps some of you can tell me. (They tell him it was 20 years.)

Brothers and sisters, I can assure you that in Cuba some of the mercenaries who receive pay from abroad to carry out subversive activities spend barely three months in jail before the pressure and letters from all sides start arriving, according to plans and mechanisms set in place beforehand, asking us to set them free. We have released a large number of rightfully sentenced counterrevolutionaries! Because it has been a long struggle.

At the beginning of the Revolution there were 300 counterrevolutionary organizations involved in terrorism, and when 1200 prisoners were captured in just that one action, they did not even spend two years in prison. We suggested to those who sent them: "Look, if you pay damages in medicine and baby-food, we will set them all free." Quite a few of them committed crimes afterwards, they killed our comrades with bombs and attacks. If they had been in prison for 30 years, the lives of many comrades would have been spared. But, that risk did not enter into our calculations, and one day a ship loaded with "heroes" reached the United States with no problems. They were given a flag, I think that the then president gave it to them or the other way around so that one day it might be unfurled in a free Cuba. In fact they could not save anything, neither the flag nor the pennant, nor their weapons, not a thing. That was many years ago.

Since those incidents I have spoken to quite a few of those who took part in that expedition who have changed their opinions, their way of thinking, who feel different now because people can change.

I gave you the example of what happened in the Bay of Pigs because it shows the continuity of a policy that we have pursued since the war in the Sierra Maestra. In the first clashes, the enemy soldiers fought on to the last cartridge, they thought we would kill them. Later, that changed. Over the course of the war we took thousands of prisoners. We gave priority to their wounded and treated them before our own. No prisoner was ever executed, not a single one of them was ever beaten. The International Red Cross can witness to that. They have the lists and the files of hundreds of prisoners taken captive in the last offensive by government forces against our Front Number One in the summer of 1958. You can look into through them to see if any soldier was ever beaten, if any soldier was executed.

They were our arms suppliers. They were transferred to other provinces and when the columns arrived and they found themselves losing in some battle they did not fight on to the end anymore, like at the beginning. To be more exact, it has to be said that, as a rule, they always fought, they did not cease offering strong resistance but when they realized the battle was lost, they surrendered. There were soldiers who surrendered three times. Why? Because we had a policy towards the enemy, just as we had a policy towards the civilian population. They killed civilian population, burned houses, stole everything, and paid nothing. We paid for everything we bought. If there was nobody around, we left the money with a neighbor or somewhere else. For the whole time the war lasted, in Front Number One in the Sierra Maestra, which was where all the columns left from, we had the same war doctrine, the same political doctrine. I do not remember a single case of one of our combatants behaving disrespectfully towards the wife or daughter of a peasant family.

After we were scattered --immediately after the landing our yacht-- the war was won in less than 24 months, starting out with seven armed men, with the help of all the people against forces which had 80,000 men, that is, counting soldiers, sailors and police. Why? Firstly, because we were defending a just cause (APPLAUSE), and secondly because we had a policy towards the peasantry and the population in general, and a policy towards the enemy. Without that policy, victory would not have been possible, not in 2 year nor in 30, even assuming that everything else was done more or less correctly.

Those traditions remain in place still today. You can ask South Africans who were prisoners of our troops if anyone beat them, if a single one of them was executed, because we taught and passed on our war policy to those with whom we collaborated. There are many places where combatants kill one another. That is how it is.

In our case, neither in our war nor on our internationalist missions was any prisoner ever beaten or executed. There are living witnesses to this. That, of course, is what builds a good morale and authority.

Even the police were surprised when those disturbances occurred in the capital on August 5 of 1994. It had never happened before. Groups of civilians who numbered several hundred people began throwing stones at shop windows and houses. People were somewhat dismayed. I heard the news, I was on my way to my offices and they told me, "This is happening." I said, "Not one single unit is to move out." I alerted my escort, nine men who were with me. I had requested three jeeps --I wanted to go in a jeep, not in a safe car, nor in an armored car-- and the jeeps arrived. Counting the nine in my escort, a comrade who is here and at that time was working with me and whom you know, Felipe Pérez Roque, presently our brilliant minister of Foreign Affairs (APPLAUSE) and comrade Lage, who joined us on the way, we were a total of 12 people.

We headed towards the place where all the commotion was. The escort had categorical orders not to use weapons. When we arrived I stepped down the jeep, walked to the place and the people reacted immediately. In a matter of minutes the disturbances ceased and even those same people who had been thrown stones got caught up in the mood and marched in one great throng. We went down to the Malecón and back on foot. That is and will always be the Revolution's style. (APPLAUSE)

In our country, the people have not seen a fire truck turning its hoses on the population, or men wearing those outfits which make them look like denizens of another planet, carrying all that gear and using brutal methods. That has never happened in our country in 40 years. We would give a big prize to anyone who could show us just one photograph of that.

I remember that in the first years of the Revolution there were 300 counterrevolutionary organizations, armed bands, all over the country, thousands of people in prison. When I was visiting the Isle of Pines, now the Isle of Youth, I used to meet with those prisoners who were working in the fields with machetes, axes and I talked to them. They never tried to harm me!

I met several times with those who invaded through the Bay of Pigs, I even went to the prison after they were sentenced. Not one of them showed me the least disrespect!

Ethics and an honorable behavior are invaluable. That is the most powerful force anyone can have. (APPLAUSE)

I have already told you about my trips, about all the threats. I even said I would like to live a few years more. Nevertheless, I can also assure you that I would not change a single principle, I would not accept a single dishonor, I would not give in to a single threat in exchange for my life. (APPLAUSE)

That is why I told you I was happy when I began the trip to this country, to New York rather --I do not have a visa to visit the country, only for New York and within its 25 miles, not a millimeter beyond. I was pleased of my contempt for the series of threats and my desire to meet with you.

Perhaps these views I have offered you will be useful for others who, like you, have been so brave and have shown us so much solidarity.

I have spoken of the Third World's serious social problems. But there are serious social problems even in such a rich country as this, the richest in the world. I want to mention some of them.

Thirty-six million people, 14% of the population, live below the poverty line, a rate twice as high as that of other developed countries. Double that of Europe and Japan.

Forty-three million people are not health-insured and another 30 million have such low medical coverage that it is practically non-existent.

There are 30 million illiterates and another 30 million functional illiterates. Cuba did not make this up, these are official figures from international organizations.

Among the black population the rate of poverty is over 29%; the rate for the whole population is 14%. The poverty rate among the black population is, therefore, more than twice that of the general population of the United States. Among black children the figure reaches 40%. In some cities and rural areas in the United States it is over 50%.

Despite economic expansion, the poverty rates in America are from two to three times higher than those in Western Europe, and 22% of American children live in poverty. These are official figures.

Only 45% of all workers in the private sector have social security coverage. It is estimated that 13% of the total U.S. population will not live beyond 60 years of age.

Women still earn only 73% of what men earn in comparable jobs and make up 70% of part-time workers, those who have no right to any social benefits.

Between 1981 and 1995, 85% of new workers with more than one job were women.

The richest 1% of the population, who in 1975 owned 20% of the wealth, now owns 36%. And the gap keeps widening.

There is not one millionaire, not one person who belongs to the upper middle class, among the 3600 people sentenced to capital punishment who are now on death row in U.S. prisons. One might wonder why. You perhaps have a better answer than I do. I am not accusing anyone, I simply say what is going on.

Apparently, one needs to reach the category of millionaire to have the decency and discipline needed to never be targeted for such sentence.

There are more statistics which are a little hard to take, but which I have to tell you about.

In the whole history of the United States not one single white man has ever been executed for having raped a black woman. (APPLAUSE)

Nevertheless, and this is an historical fact, during the time that rape was considered a capital crime, of the 455 people executed for rape, 405 were black: that is to say, 9 out of 10.

In the state of Pennsylvania, for example, where the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed in 1776, only 9% of the total population are black. Yet, 62% of those sentenced to death, that is, a proportion seven times greater, are black.

One more thing. More than 90% of the 3600 sentenced to death were victims of physical or sexual abuse during their childhood.

A recent study by a non-governmental organization indicates that black men have a 13 times greater chance of being given longer sentences than white men when it comes to drug-related offenses, although there are five times as many white men dealing drugs in the United States.

More than 60% of the women in prison in the United States are African-American or Hispanic.

Perhaps all we Hispanics, African-Americans, and all people from different ethnic groups other than white are particularly prone to commit all sorts of crimes.

I am not glossing over the crimes that may have been committed, far from it. Neither am I in a position to accurately know what the procedures are like and what usually happens. I simply wonder why. I simply wonder if we are genetically criminal, in which case it would not matter if all of sub-Saharan Africa, if all the indigenous peoples, if all the mixed race people and all the white people in Latin America, all the people in Caribbean nations including Cubans, of course, were vanished. This is a question that we have at least the right to ask ourselves. I have lived these 74 years that you remembered in which I have dealt with a lot of people.

I was born in the country, the son of a landowner. My father was a poor peasant from Spain. He first came to Cuba as a draftee with the Spanish army in the last war of independence and had never gone to school. Once the conflict was over in 1898, he was sent back to his country. But, later he came back, *motu proprio*.

He worked in the system in place at that time and eventually managed to bring together and direct more than a hundred immigrants or Cuban day laborers like himself. It was the time when the United Fruit Company, in order to develop its sugar plantations in the neocolonial system installed in Cuba, cut and burned the precious wood forests, like those that were used to build the famous Escorial palace in Spain and even the biggest battleship in the days of Admiral Nelson. It was sunk at the Battle of Trafalgar. Those woods were highly prized and my father and those men he had recruited were cutting the forests and precious wood. Who could blame them?

Well, he made some money and bit by bit he bought up land, a lot of land. He ended up owning about 900 hectares of land and controlling more than 10,000 hectares of leased land. I was born and lived on that huge estate. I was lucky to be the son and not the grandson of a landowner, therefore, I had no time to develop the mentality and culture of the rich. There is no merit in being a revolutionary, it depends on many factors. All my friends were poor children and teenagers of my own age. I got to know the poor shacks all around, both on my family land and on the enormous plantations owned by the large U.S. companies where many Haitian immigrants lived. There the living and working conditions were worse than those of slaves although slavery had been abolished in Cuba in 1886. That did not make me a revolutionary, but it helped me later on to understand the situation and the injustices in the country where I was born.

I will add a few words to what I have said so far. You mentioned a while ago the name of an African-American recently executed. You know that our people vigorously condemned the judicial murder of Shaka Sankofa for a crime he did not commit (APPLAUSE), despite the unanimous condemnation of world public opinion and even that of many governments in the world.

I requested a lot of information, data, and details. I even went as far as to look at small maps and sketches of the place where the crimes he was accused of was committed. Only person claimed to have seen him, at night, from quite a distance, a quick glance that not even the most sensitive camera could have recorded, that, and other evidence, led me to believe in his innocence. I am not saying this because someone claimed it was true, but because I analyzed all the information and reached that conclusion. (APPLAUSE)

I even analyzed his social origins, the marginality into which he was born, his first clashes with the law. When explaining to our own people, I have quoted them as an example of the true factors which lead a young man, black or white or of whatever ethnic group, to commit a crime. Also, I am a lawyer. I know something about law. I defended myself when I was on trial for the attack on the Moncada garrison and I have had to do so more than once since I became a lawyer. I hardly had any other clients. (LAUGHTER)

If these were not my own conclusions, I would be acting like a common demagogue in stating what I have just said. (APPLAUSE)

A televised round table was held in our country in which internationally known figures participated. I can see from here one person who took part in that round table.

I am equally well aware that for some time now you have been caught up in a very just struggle, a struggle which our people also fully support: the struggle for the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal (SHOUTS AND PROLONGED APPLAUSE), a journalist sentenced to death whose unfair trial has given rise to a giant protest movement throughout the world.

If we go a bit further and analyze the historical data, regarding that one white man for every nine African-Americans executed for rape --there were about 50 whites in total-- we see that other factors aside, the element of social marginality was always present. And when, as it is the case with the African-Americans, racial discrimination is added to social marginality, tens and tens of millions of people suffer horribly from this injustice, including those who have never been sentenced to death nor to prison. Actually, they were born sentenced to be humiliated every day of their lives.

I am more or less white. I say more or less because there is no ethnic group that can claim purity. I remember that I visited the United States in November 1948. I remember because I was there at the same time that Truman, despite all predictions, won the elections. I had gone to visit Harvard. I wanted to study economics. I already had revolutionary ideas but I wanted to equip myself with more knowledge. On the journey back to New York, I traveled in a cheap second-hand car bought for 200 or 300 dollars, one of those sold for a bit more than they are worth as scrap metal, and I drove along those highways down to Florida to go on to Cuba by sea in a ferry. I stopped several times in some places for lunch, a meal or to buy something. I perceived contempt more than once, sort of a disparaging attitude just because I spoke another language or because I was Hispanic. I had the impression that it was not only certain ethnic groups that were discriminated against but also people of any other nationality who spoke a different language.

Since then I have only been back to the United States for a few days in, I think, 1956. I was living in Mexico, preparing to go back to Cuba. I visited New York and other places to meet with the few Cuban immigrants there were in the United States at that time when the Cuban Adjustment Act did not exist. No one could just arrive on a boat or raft; there were almost no aliens here back then. It was actually the Revolution, which opened the doors to hundreds of thousands of people who had wanted to emigrate for a long time, and had no hope of doing so.

Therefore, we could remind those who so hate Cuba, the Revolution and myself in particular that they should thank the Revolution every now and then, because without the Revolution there would not be many Cuban millionaires (APPLAUSE), without the Revolution there would not be a so-called Cuban-American National Foundation (BOOING), without the Revolution there would not be Cuban members of the U.S. Congress, they would not be able to sponsor certain bills, they would not be courted in the election campaigns, they would not be granted their every wish even though a large majority of them do not vote because given the privileges granted to them it suits them better to be Cuban than American citizens.

What I say can be irrefutably proved. There are statistics, I asked for them one day. For example, how many resident's visas were granted in the last 30 years before the triumph of the Revolution? The numbers were insignificant in the 30s and 40s, and scarcely 2,000 or 3,000 between 1950 and 1959.

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It is well known that in the first few days of January 1959 a large number of war criminals, embezzlers and Batista accomplices who had murdered thousands of Cubans and looted the country found safe haven in the United States. The first revolutionary laws that had to do with recovering embezzled goods, with lowering the rates for basic services, with giving back employment to workers unjustly dismissed during the tyranny, with urban and agrarian reforms and other measures of elementary social justice terrified the richest sectors of our society and they began to emigrate to the United States.

From the first day of the Revolution, visas for the United States were unusually easy to obtain, especially by those from the upper and middle classes, for doctors and other university educated professionals, professors and teachers, technicians and skilled workers. Many of these people had always longed to immigrate to this country. Hostility towards the Revolution and the aim of depriving us of a skilled labor force became obvious almost immediately. They also needed former Batista officers and young people to feed the mercenary attack brigade, a plan that nobody knew about at that time. However, permission was always given to those leaving legally for the United States.

The brain drain encouraged the enormous efforts in the field of education that the triumphant Revolution had begun immediately. Even during the fighting at the Bay of Pigs the commercial air flights were not interrupted. After the Missile Crisis they abruptly suspended the flights and the visas. Tens of thousands of families were separated. On the other hand, even before the Cuban Adjustment Act, they allowed to enter U.S. territory anyone who reached their shores by any means available to them even by hijacking planes or boats.

After the Camarioca incident, 360,000 Cubans left the country legally, in absolute safety and without a single victim. Among these there were, in addition to relatives of United States residents, a large number of professionals and teachers who could earn a salary ten times higher in the United States than in Cuba, and skilled workers and technicians from major industries. They were in fact economic migrants. Nevertheless, everyone who went to the United States was given the name of "political refugee" or "exile". If this concept were applied to Mexicans and other Latin Americans who migrate to the United States, there would be between 12 and 15 million Mexican political refugees (APPLAUSE), a million Haitian political refugees, a million Dominican political refugees, hundreds of thousands of Central Americans political refugees, and who knows how many Puerto Ricans. (APPLAUSE) Because Puerto Ricans are patriots and love their country. So why do they come to the United States? For economic reasons and there are almost as many here as on their island.

There is a million in New York. This year we saw them supporting the just cause of Vieques. (APPLAUSE) We had a televised round table on that with many international personalities of great prestige.

These round tables are broadcast on television via satellite in English, of course, which is the language most spoken throughout the world. Our television also seeds internet. Unfortunately only 1% of Africans

have access to the Internet, so we have to reach them by radio. The same thing happens with Latin America.

As to this subject of communications and cooperation with Third World countries, I want to inform you that we have developed a program to teach reading and writing by radio. This idea came up one day when I asked the president of Niger, who was visiting Cuba, what the illiteracy rate was in his country, and he said, 87% illiteracy and only 17% have any schooling. We are celebrating the arrival of the next century and the next millenium and I wonder: In what century of the third millenium will that country with the same population as Cuba have eradicated illiteracy?

I was contemplating the fact that our country with 11 million people, the same as Niger, has 250,000 professors and teachers. It is the same as with doctors: Cuba has the highest per capita rate of teachers in the world. When one thinks about that illiteracy rate knowing that infant mortality among children from under 5 years of age in Niger is higher than 200 for every 1000 live births, that is, more than 25 times as high as the infant mortality rate in Cuba, it is impossible not to ask oneself: When? When? When? I asked him, "Do they have radios?" He said, "Yes, almost every family has a radio." I said, "How come if they do not have electricity?" He explained, "Yes, because they have a Japanese device which costs X number of dollars to recharge the radio batteries."

I suggested to a group of Cuban educational experts that they study the possibility of teaching reading and writing by radio, starting with the idea of developing a small manual which, using pictures of animals, plants and common objects would identify the letters of the alphabet and would make it possible to make syllables, words, phrases, and to introduce concepts in the given language, using radio broadcasts under the guidance of specialized teachers. In three months our educational experts designed a method which when tested in the Creole language in Haiti with 300 illiterate people showed really promising results. A pilot program will soon begin with 3000 people. A literacy course using television would be very simple, but access to television is difficult for the majority of the world's illiterate. Our educational specialists who created, monitored and guided the experiment are astounded. The course is ready in French, Portuguese and Creole.

Here is another way of cooperating with the Third World, by teaching hundreds of millions of people to read and write for an infinitesimal cost. Enough talk about the 800 million illiterate adults, if by using radio, which is not the Internet nor television, it is possible to teach reading and writing to hundreds of millions of people.

It is hard to imagine how humiliated a person feels who cannot read and write. It reminds me a lot of my mother and my father, who barely knew how to read and write, and I can bear witness to how much they suffered. I know they did. That explains the hunger for knowledge that exists in our country. Even when our people have completed grade 10, or grade 12, they still have an insatiable hunger to learn about other things. We have found this out and have created certain programs --I hope that someday you will learn about them-- which are simply astounding, hoping to create a comprehensive and general mass culture. We are even going to teach languages.

I will give you a preview. The new school year has already begun in Cuba. After the battle to get Elián back and our amazement at how talented our children were, our schools now have a 20-inch color television for every 100 of our 2,400,000 elementary, junior and senior high school students, at a cost of 4.6 million dollars (APPLAUSE); and 15, 000 video cassette players at a cost of 1.5 million dollars. So, we are already making full use of the mass media in our school system in support of our more than 250,000 teachers and professors.

Let me just say that in October a course on narrative techniques designed by one of our country's most capable intellectuals will be broadcast from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. And starting on November 1, from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. there will be a language course, three times a week. To put it simply, many people in our population can not remember the grammar they learned a long time ago. I joke that we do not speak Spanish, but a sort of dialect.

So, three times a week in Spanish and --just imagine-- twice a week in English! We consider English to be a universal language. Centuries of British colonialism and about 100 years of --lets give it an elegant name-- enormous American influence has made it into a universal language. It is widely used, but not patented, so we shall use it.

Almost all scientific and literary books are published first in English. I have been given many as presents and they are in English.

We are going to make sure the knowledge of English is widespread; television courses are already being prepared. Many of those thousands of teachers will see them and record them and show them in school, they will not have to go anywhere for them.

Immediately after we are going to begin French courses. Our hope is that all of our people or the overwhelming majority who are interested will know three languages: Spanish, English and French (APPLAUSE) at minimal cost. That is, the cost of the electricity for the broadcasts and the printed materials that will be sent to all those who would take the course directly, or to those who request them. In the latter case we will send them the materials charging them for the costs of production and distribution. These are courses for everybody who wants to take advantage of them and we will promote them.

I think that the fact that I have told you about this idea will be a source of satisfaction for many of my compatriots, for almost all of them.

One day I asked the minister [of Education], "How many English teachers do you need for high school?" And he said, "Two thousand". I replied, "That is more than enough." We are not planning to reduce the number of graduates in primary or high school education. On the contrary, we will not reduce the number of teachers even by one; the numbers will be increased so as to be able to reduce the number of pupils per teacher. That battle has already begun to improve the quality of our education. But we will place the mass media, our television services with no commercials, at the service of education and of a general, comprehensive level of culture. (APPLAUSE)

I think that our country is on its way to a completely new era. I will say no more. (APPLAUSE)

I have gone over my time. I have not kept my word. (APPLAUSE) I will only take up a few more minutes of your time.

I promised you that before I finished my speech I would talk to you about two things: first, the little boy. Elián is doing wonderfully. (APPLAUSE) You can hardly imagine what a happy boy he is, how intelligent he is, what a serious boy he is, he is really extraordinary. Vast crowds did not welcome him --just as we said-- but only by some schoolmates and his closest relatives. Not one of us, not a single Party or State official was there. The family spent six minutes greeting those who were there to welcome them and then immediately left the airport with Elián. He did not miss classes, not even the day he left the United States. In two months, with his family, his teacher and his little classmates, he had made extraordinary progress and later, in Cuba, from June 29 up until July 28, he had intensive classes together with his classmates who were here; he was missing some sounds. He graduated on a par with all the other children and moved up to second grade.

His father insisted that I meet him. I said to him, "I will wait until he has finished school." And when he finished the school year, very discreetly, I went to see him and said hello.

Now we should make sure that this child has a normal life, normal classes, because everybody knows this little boy. We can count on the support of the whole population, the cooperation of all our people not to approach him when he goes to school, not to shout slogans at him, to treat him like any other child. He has only appeared on television a few times, and that is because the people were demanding

it. He has never been asked a direct question, he is always shown with his family and only for a few minutes. He has been given careful attention.

The first day of his new school year has already begun. He is living in the same modest house where he lived before. He is studying in the same school, he has the same teachers --because these rotate up to the fourth grade-- the teacher who was in Wye Plantation and the other teacher whom they did not allow to go, and his same classmates from first grade are still with him and will be until the fourth grade. Also, in the middle of this month his father began working in the same modest work place because that is what he wanted. Everybody wants him to visit. Because not only the little boy but his father also became very respected in our country. He resisted all pressures, even when they tried to buy him out with his son, with promises to return him the child if he stayed to live in the United States. Millions of dollars, and he never wavered, not for one second. (APPLAUSE) It seems to me that he is an example. On this point I should say that I will not elaborate on the details, we can send printed material, that way I will save time. But you will hear more about the child.

We strongly believe in the idea that this little boy should be given the best possible education. Everything would be meaningless if this boy came home and were not really a good student and a good person. They are a good example for our people, and to a certain degree, a good example for many millions of people around the world.

Our people will always thank those of you who were so worried and those lawmakers who spoke here and others who fought so hard as well as the Council of Churches and the various other churches who honorably defended such a just cause.

In the same token I should say that our people will never forget and will always thank the American people who spoke out en masse in favor of the legitimate rights of a father and his son. (APPLAUSE) Once more I said to myself: the American people are very idealistic, therefore, for them to support an unjust cause they first have to be deceived, they have to be made to believe, like in Vietnam and other places, that that was right. In this case, they learned the truth due to a variety of factors, particularly through the mass media which broadcast footage of 400,000 mothers marching, hundreds of thousands of children marching, a million people marching in a struggle that extended for seven months and which still continues against the Cuban Adjustment Act, for the victims it creates. That struggle is also being waged against the Torricelli Act, the Helms-Burton Act, the blockade and the economic war, in fact for respect and peace for our country. This is what we swore to do there, in Baraguá, the site of Antonio Maceo's historic protestation, and we are still struggling for those aims today.

When the U.S. public learned the truth, they supported the child and his family in numbers that rose to over 80% and which among African-Americans at the height of the events reached 92%. (APPLAUSE) Our people will never forget that.

I am not claiming that our country is a perfect model of equality and justice. We believed at the beginning that when we established the fullest equality before the law and complete intolerance for any demonstration of sexual discrimination in the case of women, or racial discrimination in the case of ethnic minorities, these phenomena would vanish from our society. It was some time before we discovered that marginality and racial discrimination with it are not something that one gets rid of with a law or even with ten laws, and we have not managed to eliminate them completely, even in 40 years.

There has never been nor will there ever be a case where the law is applied according to ethnic criteria. However, we did discover that the descendants of those slaves who had lived in the slave quarters were the poorest and continued to live, after the supposed abolition of slavery, in the poorest housing.

There are marginal neighborhoods; there are hundreds of thousand of people who live in marginal neighborhoods, and not only blacks and mixed race people, but whites as well. There are marginal whites, too, and all this we inherited from the previous social system. I told you that our country is on its way to a new era. I hope someday to be able to speak to you of the things we are doing today and how

we are going to continue to do them.

We do not have the money to build housing for all the people who live in what we could call marginal conditions. But we have lots of other ideas which will not wait until the end of times and which our united and justice loving people will implement to get rid of even the tiniest vestiges of marginality and discrimination. I have faith that we will succeed because that is the endeavor today of the leaders of our youth, our students and our people.

I shall not say more, I am simply saying that we are aware that there is still marginality in our country. But, there is the will to eradicate it with the proper methods for this task to bring more unity and equality to our society. (APPLAUSE)

On behalf of my Homeland, I promise to keep you informed about the progress of our efforts.

When those American friends went to Cuba and talked to us of the two cases I mentioned, Sankofa and Mumia, they supplied me with detailed information about their lives and the injustices committed against them. The televised round tables helped a lot to spread awareness about the seriousness of what was happening. It is not a disgrace to be poor, the errors that any person might commit as a child or a teenager are not a disgrace. What is a disgrace is that in the century which is just beginning, with all the technological advances that have been made, when humankind even has aspirations to populate the planet Mars, there are children, teenagers and adults on our planet living in conditions of marginality (APPLAUSE), and that in many countries on top of being marginalized they are discriminated against.

This is the last thing I will talk about. There is only this page left to explain to you about a news item that came out today. The pastor of this church spoke about it, and referred to a sign. It seems incredible to me that the simplest thing in the world has made big news. I thought big news had to be something that was happening in the world, the subjects that were being discussed at the UN Summit Meeting, what we had to do to save humankind and not only Africa. At the rate we are going, not only Africans will vanish but all of us as well.

At this rate, with these models of consumerism which lead to the destruction of the natural means of life, of the atmosphere, to shortages and pollution of drinking water and of the seas, to climatic changes, natural disasters, to poverty, to deeper and widening gaps within countries and between countries, you can state with mathematical precision that the social and economic order which exists in the world today is unsustainable. I feel that these are truly important issues. I was surprised to see that the big news, almost a scandal, was something that happened almost accidentally at the United Nations yesterday. Before I came here I found myself obliged to write a brief clarifying note. I called it "About greeting president Clinton" and it reads thus:

"After the lunch offered by the UN Secretary General, at the end of the Millennium Summit opening session, we were asked to move to an adjacent room for the official photo. We walked toward that room, one following the other, through a narrow space between tables. Then, I perceived President Clinton standing hardly four meters ahead greeting various Heads of States passing by him. He was shaking everyone's hand out of courtesy. I could not run away to avoid him, neither could he. In both cases it would have been a shameful cowardice. Thus, I followed the others. In about two minutes I was in front of him. Just like everyone before me, I stopped for a few seconds and with due courtesy and dignity I greeted him (APPLAUSE) and he did exactly the same thing; then, I proceed forward. Anything else would have been rude and improper. Everything lasted less than 20 seconds.

"That simple event was soon known and various media reported it kindly. There were soon rumors, and official press spokesmen lacking the right information began giving different versions.

"The Miami Mafia grew hysteric. To them, the President had committed a great crime. They can be such bigots!

Speech delivered by solidarity rally held in Riverside Church, Harlem, New York.

Published on FIDEL Soldier of Ideas (<http://www.fidelcastro.cu>)

"As for myself, I am pleased with my respectful and civilized behavior toward the President of the country which hosted the Summit."

Today, more rumors and official news reporting that I had walked over to the place where the President was standing. I had no need to do that. Everyone knows that no honorable Cuban would ever beg for a greeting or any honor.

This would be all. I ask your forgiveness for having gone over my time. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

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