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My father's 'crime'

By Yan Valdes Morejon | November 4, 2007

IN 2002, I joined my father at a peaceful gathering in Havana of Cubans eager to see freedom and democracy restored to our country. Forces of President Fidel Castro's regime were lying in wait, and as they set upon us, my father urged me to run. Reluctantly, I obeyed, and as I ran, I saw him and the others being beaten and taken into custody.

As they took my father away, he yelled to the gathering crowd, "Long live human rights!" So today, when debate rages in the United States about what should be done about Cuba, the question for me is deeply personal. My father, Oscar Elias Biscet, is a political dissident who has been jailed by the Castro regime for many years because of his support for democracy and human rights in Cuba.

My father is not alone. Many Cubans - both inside and outside of Cuba - have been resisting the Castro regime for decades, calling for freedom for all Cubans. But my father's imprisonment serves as a reminder of what the Cuba debate is really all about - not a debate concerning sanctions or engagement - but individual human beings yearning to be free.

My father was born and raised in Cuba, and he trained to be a medical doctor. Working in Castro's hospitals, he saw firsthand the regime's terrible policy of enforced abortions. He publicly objected to this practice, and lost his job and his license as a result. He went on to found an organization, the Lawton Foundation for Human Rights.

For his activism, my father has been punished severely by the Castro regime. He has spent almost a decade in prison, and is serving a 25-year sentence. He has been held in inhumane conditions, sometimes together with violent criminals, and at other times in isolation and total darkness for extended periods. He has lost more than 40 pounds as well as most of his teeth. His crime? Calling for respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Cuba.

My father has been put on trial several times by the Castro regime. Each time, the regime painted his nonviolent, freedom-loving activities as a threat to the security of the state. These illegal proceedings have been widely criticized by many, including the United Nations, which has called upon the Castro regime to release my father.

It is not easy to be the child of a prisoner of conscience. I was a teenager when my father was arrested for the first time. He has been arrested dozens of occasions since then, often without warning, often at night, and it is a frightening experience every time. Nonetheless, my father always met Castro's thugs at the door with dignity, and he has held his head high.

But more clearly than the arrests, the public beatings, the times my family was forced to hide, I remember my father telling me that we all have an obligation to stand up for our freedom. In his letters from prison, he has remained resolute and unapologetic - repeating that freedom is worth the sacrifice. I live in the United States now, and I appreciate its liberties every day. But, like my father, I yearn to live in a free Cuba.

My father has been inspired by the examples of others who peacefully and tirelessly have promoted the rights of all people. And he, in turn, is an inspiration to me and to countless others in Cuba and around the world.

I will be in Washington tomorrow with my sister to accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom on behalf of our father. In recognizing him, President Bush will honor all those who have dedicated their lives to opposing the current regime and advocating for freedom and democracy in Cuba. And this honor could not come at a better time, as the Castro regime is on the cusp of a remarkable transition.

As the debate about what to do next about Cuba continues in the United States, we must remember my father and all those oppressed by the current regime. We must rededicate ourselves to seeing this fight through to the end on their behalf.

Yan Valdes Morejon, a resident of Miami, is the son of imprisoned dissident Oscar Elias Biscet.