November 7, 2025

Hon. Alena Douhan
UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Re: Impact of Unilateral Coercive Measures on Cuba

Honorable Rapporteur Douhan:

The Alliance for Cuba Engagement and Respect ("ACERE") writes ahead of your upcoming visit to Cuba from November 11 – 21, 2025, to examine the impact of unliterally imposed coercive measures ("UCM")[1] by the United States on Cuba. ACERE is a non-profit, civil society organization based in the United States composed of a coalition of organizations and individuals who believe that indiscriminate sanctions are unlawful, improper and immoral. Our members support the normalization of bilateral and diplomatic relations between the two countries and believe that engagement and respect for Cuba's sovereignty—as opposed to outdated, illegal and ineffective sanctions and restrictions—provide a better approach for promoting constructive relations between the two countries. We provide policy insight and analysis to policy makers, advocates and individuals who believe that a path towards engagement and diplomacy is more effective, ethical and beneficial for citizens of both nations.

We take this opportunity to share insights, as requested by the mandate holder, concerning the impact on the Cuban people's enjoyment of human rights and the severe constraints and impediments to these due to the imposition of a 65-year-old sanctions regime by the United States. In particular, our submission highlights the impact of sanctions and the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism and the overcompliance by private and public actors on the ability of Cubans to fully enjoy social and economic rights, engage in robust economic activity and transactions, and in driving irregular and unsafe migration.

[1] The unilateral coercive measures may also be referred to in this submission as sanctions or the embargo.

A. The impact of unilateral coercive measures on Cubans' enjoyment of economic and social rights has been devastating for generations.

United States-imposed UCM have had wide-ranging economic, social, and human rights consequences—both direct and indirect. In addition, infrastructure decay, fuel shortages, and limited internet access also affect education, transportation, and livelihoods – all of which are severely impacted by sanctions, which limit the ability of the Cuban government and Cuban people to access critical and raw materials to sustain the social support network that has historically sustained the nation's ability to guarantee critical economic and social rights.

In 1960 when the U.S. began to legislate its extensive and overinclusive sanctions regime against Cuba, senior officials in the State Department stated that the policy purpose of the UCM would "make[] the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government."[2] The stated purpose of the UCM to cause hunger and despair has never been rejected by any administration, nor has their stated objective changed. Thus, it is the explicit goal of the UCMs imposed by the United States to create food insecurity and unlivable economic conditions, in and of itself a violation of international law.

1. Food insecurity remains a goal of the UCMs, and it has only worsened in recent years.

The U.S. embargo has had a profound and long-term impact on food security in Cuba, affecting both the availability and affordability of food for ordinary Cubans. The embargo significantly worsens these challenges by restricting trade, finance, and agricultural imports. Cuba has suffered chronic shortages of food in the past several decades, yet within the past five years those shortages have intensified, along with a deteriorating quality of care and nutrition.

Cuba imports 60–80% of its food supply, yet because of the embargo, Cuba cannot trade freely with the U.S.—its closest and most cost-effective agricultural supplier—forcing it to import from distant markets (Asia, Europe, Latin America), which raises transport and insurance costs. For example, some of the rice that Cuba provides is bought and brought from Vietnam, creating additional transportation costs to bring rice from so far away. In addition, even though the embargo allows limited food sales to Cuba under the 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA), all transactions must be paid in cash, in advance, and processed through third-country banks, since Cuban banks cannot access the U.S. financial system. This makes even permitted food purchases slow, costly, and logistically complex, discouraging many exporters.

While Cuba faces difficulties importing food products, it also faces severe challenges growing and producing its own food as a result of UCMs. U.S. sanctions restrict access to fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation systems, and farm machinery (many of which include U.S.

[2] Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Mallory) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Rubottom), Washington (April 6, 1960), https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d499.

components). This has led to reduced productivity, crop losses and difficulty maintaining livestock. Because Cuba cannot easily import parts for tractors or irrigation systems, it struggles to expand domestic production—further entrenching dependency on costly food imports.

U.S. sanctions on shipping companies and third-country entities trading with Cuba mean fewer vessels service Cuban ports. When ships do arrive, freight costs can be 30–50% higher than regional averages, raising prices of imported food staples (like rice, wheat, and chicken). These barriers, combined with low domestic agricultural output, have led to recurring food shortages and rationing of basic goods like rice, cooking oil, eggs, milk for children , meat and poultry. Food inflation has surged in recent years, and according to Cuba's National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI), food prices rose by over 70% between 2021 and 2023, far outpacing wages for workers in the public sector.

U.S. sanctions have crippled Cuba's ability to secure the nutritional variety it has historically provided in the monthly food rations to its citizens via the state ration system, known as "la libreta." The World Food Programme (WFP) reports that while Cuba has avoided widespread famine, the embargo contributes to micronutrient deficiencies and inconsistent access to protein and dairy, particularly affecting children, pregnant women, and the elderly. The state ration system guarantees minimal quantities of basic foods at subsidized prices—but these supplies often last less than two weeks per month. Families must then turn to informal markets, where prices are high due to scarcity and black-market dynamics. It is estimated that at least half of Cubans now purchase their food from private businesses at costs between 3-10 times that of what it would have cost had it been subsidized through public means. As a result, many Cubans cannot access food supply chains given the exorbitant costs associated with the importation and provision of mainly pantry items.

Lastly, Cuba's increasing food insecurity has been exacerbated by the Trump administration, the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation. Disruptions to tourism stemming from the Trump and Biden administrations, as well as the pandemic, drastically reduced the availability of foreign currency, making it harder for Cuba to purchase food abroad. In addition, under the first Trump administration, new restrictions on shipping, remittances, and fuel deliveries worsened shortages.

2. <u>Lack of ability of civil society groups to provide humanitarian assistance after natural disasters due to U.S. sanctions regime.</u>

To comply with international humanitarian law, unilateral coercive measures and sanctions regimes cannot impede access to essential humanitarian goods. While Cuba can import humanitarian goods in theory, sanctions on logistics, financial transactions, and shipping make procurement difficult and expensive. This has contributed to chronic shortages of basic necessities, including medications and medical equipment, especially during crises (e.g., COVID-19). Cuba has suffered numerous natural disasters in the past several years which have necessitated the shipment and receipt of humanitarian assistance, including Hurricane Ian in 2022 in the provinces of Pinar del Rio, Artemisa and Havana, Hurricane Rafael in 2024 in the province of Artemisa and Hurricane Melissa in 2025 in eastern Cuba, all of which have been complicated by UCMs.

In addition, after the explosion of oil tankers in the Matanzas province in 2022, the State Department stated that it would facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance, but absolutely no effort was made to do so, nor were any restrictions lifted, explanations given or clarified to non-profit organizations looking to make donations of goods, nor any actual assistance provided. Instead, the U.S. merely offered technical assistance (e.g., counsel, expert advice) to Cuban authorities, while providing no assistance to civil society groups looking to provide humanitarian aid.

Lastly, Cuba's designation as on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List has added a new layer of constraint in the provision of humanitarian aid. The designation has hampered numerous efforts by national and international organizations to deliver aid and financial assistance, as their funds in banks outside of Cuba and/or the United States have been frozen and shipments of humanitarian assistance blocked.

3. Severe interference with the enjoyment of the right to health.

Perhaps nowhere have the UCMs been more visible than in the area of healthcare and enjoyment of the right to health. The embargo has undermined rights to health, food, education, and development, according to the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations. Cuba's healthcare system, which provides universal free healthcare, has struggled to obtain spare parts and medicine due to import restrictions. Between March 2022 and February 2023, an estimated loss to the health sector of almost $240 million was reported due to the embargo's effects, including Cuba's inability to procure medical equipment and supplies. The following year during the same time period, the losses estimate jumped to $268 million. By one older estimate, sanctions against Cuba have forced it to pay higher costs for medicines, equipment and shipping because it cannot easily procure from the U.S. or U.S.-origin component supply chain. For example, shipping costs can be significantly higher in some cases, depending on where equipment and/or medicines are shipped from.[3] The United Nations notes that the embargo has also "directly impacted medical specialization by obstructing … purchase of new technologies and access to scientific, technical and bibliographical information."[4]

Many ACERE members have family members and loved ones in Cuba who are receiving medical care or undergoing medical treatment. In one case, a Cuban man in Havana who undergoes hemodialysis treatment three times a week at one of Cuba's largest hospitals often arrives to find that he can only receive partial treatment because the hospital lacks the proper medical equipment and medicine to administer dialysis treatment. This includes the lack of syringes and needles, baking soda, and even water, which the hospital has been without on numerous occasions. The inability of medical institutions that provide a large part of critical

[3] Washington Office on Latin America, *Myths And Facts About The U.S. Embargo On Medicine And Medical Supplies* (1997),https://www.wola.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/Cuba/past/cuba_myths_facts.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[4] U.N. Doc. A/69/98, Report of the Secretary-General, *Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States of America against Cuba* (June 26, 2014).

healthcare to populations facing severe, terminal or serious medical conditions to access basic equipment and materials undermines the healthcare infrastructure of the country.[5]

B. Cubans have diminished economic activity and access to credit, markets and financial transactions as a result of U.S. sanctions and overcompliance by private and public actors.

The existing U.S. sanctions and embargo intensifications under both Trump administrations - and supported by now Secretary of State (and then Senator) Marco Rubio's Cuba policy – have had a direct and chilling effect on Cuba's emerging private sector, including small entrepreneurs (cuentapropistas), cooperatives, and micro- and small enterprises (MSMEs). Under the Obama administration (2014–2016), the U.S. partially normalized relations with Cuba, easing sanctions to allow U.S. travelers to:

- Spend money in private restaurants and "casas particulares" (private guesthouses);
- Enable remittances through formal channels and limited private-sector trade (e.g., sales of telecommunications and construction materials);
- Permit U.S. companies to engage with independent entrepreneurs.

These openings helped create a thriving small-business sector in Cuba — over 600,000 licensed private workers by 2017, running restaurants, repair shops, taxi services, hostels, and other microenterprises. However, the "maximum pressure" campaign initiated by the first Trump administration, maintained in place largely by the Biden administration, and now enhanced by the second Trump administration[6] has led to widespread economic depression in the Cuban public and private sectors. From 2019–2020, sanctions against FINCIMEX and American International Services led the main Cuban remittance and financial operators, Western Union (which handled remittances to Cuban families and entrepreneurs), to suspend its Cuba operations in November 2020. Its closure led to a drop of over $3 billion in annual remittances (one of Cuba's biggest private-capital inflows). As a result, small businesses lost access to the dollars they needed to import supplies or reinvest.

Cuban MSMEs (formally legalized only in 2021) cannot open foreign bank accounts, access loans or microfinance, or process foreign currency payments. Local banks operate with limited liquidity and entrepreneurs must rely on remittances from family abroad or informal cash exchanges, both of which the sanctions curtailed. Private restaurants and artisans can't import goods directly since the4 sanctions block payments and logistics. Even goods like flour, coffee machines, or software subscriptions become unavailable or prohibitively expensive because intermediaries won't risk U.S. penalties (secondary sanctions).

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[5] R. Garfield and S. Santana, *The impact of the economic crisis and the US embargo on health in Cuba*, 87(1) AM J PUBLIC HEALTH 15-20, *available at* https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9065219/.

[6] U.S. Department of State, Press Statement: Restoring a Tough U.S.-Cuba Policy (Jan. 31, 2025), https://www.state.gov/restoring-a-tough-u-s-cuba-policy.

The enhanced restrictions on travel for U.S. citizens (removal of the individual "people-to-people" category) and the overall climate of fear associated with travel to Cuba which severely curbs travel to the island has meant a serious reduction in tourist-related economic activity. After Trump banned cruise ships and individual travel in 2020, U.S. visitor arrivals fell from over 600,000 in 2018 to under 100,000 U.S. residents traveling to Cuba just two years later. Many small B&Bs (casas particulares), private restaurants, and taxi operators lost their customer base overnight, along with the individual cultural, music and artistic communities that catered to tourists. As a result, the private sector's income dropped by an estimated 60–70% between 2019–2021, according to Cuba's Ministry of Economy. Many self-employed workers surrendered licenses while others shifted to informal or black-market activity.

The UCMs imposed by the U.S. prevent most exports to Cuba (including technology, machinery, and some medicines) and restrict Cuba's access to international banking systems and credit. This has constrained economic growth and limited Cuba's ability to import essential goods. Because of U.S. penalties on third-country companies that trade with Cuba ("secondary sanctions"), many international firms avoid doing business there altogether.

C. Unilateral coercive measures drive irregular migration of Cubans, placing them at greater risk of harm.

Since President Trump took office in 2017 and initiated a campaign of increased sanctions, enforcement and placement of Cuba on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, there have been record numbers of Cubans seeking to migrate in search of better living conditions. The sanctions regime has driven forced migration for Cubans seeking to avoid what the U.S. State Department stated was the embargo's goal – to create hunger and despair.

From 2021-2024, nearly 600,000 Cubans attempted to enter the United States, surpassing the refugee wave of the early 1960s, the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the 1994 rafter crisis combined.[7] The Council on Foreign Relations estimated that "since fiscal year 2021, U.S. border officials have encountered nearly five hundred thousand Cubans at the southern U.S. border" (in a three-year time frame).[8] Since President Trump took office a second time in 2025, the humanitarian parole program in place for Cubans has been suspended, as have nearly all visa categories that could be issued to Cubans seeking to travel or emigrate to the United States.[9]

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[7] U.S. Sanctions: A Root Cause of Cuban Migration, ACERE (2024), https://acere.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Sanctions-as-Root-Cause-of-Cuban-Migration-1.pdf.
[8] Council on Foreign Relations, US-Cuba Relations (Apr. 24, 2024), https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-cuba-relations.
[9] Dept. of Homeland Sec., 90 FR 13611, *Termination of Parole Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans* ((Mar. 20, 2025); White House Proclamation, *Restricting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats* (June 4, 2025).

D. Cuba's placement on the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism List exacerbates its economic and humanitarian crisis.

Cuba's placement by President Donald J. Trump on the State Sponsors of Terrorism ("SSOT") List – and its maintenance there for the past five years – has significantly affected the ability of Cuban citizens to access and receive humanitarian assistance. Within weeks of Cuba's placement on the SSOT list, over 30 financial institutions cut ties with Cuba, severely hampering the ability of citizens and organizations in Cuba to access banking services and financial transactions.

In addition, it has detrimentally affected their ability to access and engage in financial transactions with any financial institution, entity or business located outside of Cuba. Financial institutions and commercial entities engage in overcompliance with U.S. sanctions as part of their internal risk assessment and compliance processes, undervaluing their engagement with Cuban actors and overvaluing their economic commitments to U.S. commercial entities. E-commerce platforms stopped offering their services in Cuba and Cuban entrepreneurs have had a nearly impossible time trying to access banking services to purchase and sell goods and services.[10] Cuban entrepreneurs cannot use PayPal, Stripe, Visa, MasterCard, or Western banking services as a result of the SSOT designation. This stifles Cuba's emerging tech and freelancer economy, isolating it from global markets.

Cuba's false and misleading designation as a state sponsor of terrorism has seriously affected migration and tourism patterns, both to and from the island. Once Cuba was added back to the SSOT list, encounters with Customs and Border Patrol of Cubans migrating to the U.S. – Mexico border increased 274%.[11] For many citizens of over 40 countries, traveling to Cuba means they are ineligible for a visa waiver, which significantly depresses tourism and the tourism economy – the largest private sector employer.[12]

In addition, the SSOT designation interferes with and undermines Cubans' ability to enjoy basic economic and social rights. International and foreign companies refuse to sell Cuba medical supplies as a result of the SSOT designation.[13] International suppliers refuse to sell to Cuba for fear of secondary sanctions. As a result of not wanting to be seen as doing business with a government designated to be sponsoring or aiding in terrorist activity, their refusal to extend services to Cuban private actors leaves them practically disconnected from the global economic system, as U.S. Congressman Steve Cohen (D-TN) has noted.[14]

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[10] https://acere.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/este.pdf.
[11] Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), https://borderoversight.org/2025/10/30/cbp-migrant-encounters-at-the-u-s-mexico-border-by-country-of-origin-2/.
[12] *Id*.
[13] *Id*.
[14] Letter to President Joe Biden (Rep. Cohen, D-TN, Jan. 11, 2024) (118th Congress), https://cohen.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/cohen.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/cuba-ssot-letter-final.pdf.

E. Conclusion

ACERE urges the Special Rapporteur to consider the wide-ranging impact of U.S. unilateral coercive measures on all aspects of Cuban society. While the impact may not always be visible, peeling back the layers of scarcity to understand their source will inevitably lead to the U.S. embargo and its decades-long obstinate goal of causing harm and suffering to the Cuban people. It remains a violation of international law, and as such, ACERE respectfully thanks the mandate holder for her travel to the island and work to clarify the impacts of these policies to the international community.

Respectfully,

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Co-Chair

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