

Salvador, Bahia

December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Your Excellency Army General Raul Castro Rúz

President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers

**Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development,  
Costa de Sauípe**

**Bahía, Brazil.**

Mr. President:

I am obliged to frame this as an Open Letter because it is the only way I may get through to you directly. Moreover, I want my fellow citizens and those worldwide who are interested in the vital problems of our times, to hear what I am about to say.

You are a descendant of Europeans born in Spain; I am a descendant of Africans born in the Caribbean. We are both Cubans. However, being Cuban confers no specific privilege on either of us as human beings. What it does confer is the right to have a say in the affairs of the country of our birth. So, I avail myself of that right unapologetically.

I am aware of the vast differences that separate our respective ideas about life, social relations and how the affairs of our country must be conducted. We also differ in how to interpret the daily realities that negatively impact the lives of most Cubans. But you as the president of our country, and I as a citizen, share a common responsibility; to shoulder the burden of shaping our present and molding the destiny of our nation. Regardless of class, gender, race, sexual

orientation or political affiliation, whatever Cubans do or refrain from doing will determine the future for all.

I have always upheld and respected our national sovereignty. That is why I steadfastly opposed any measure that could have endangered Cuba's independence or hurt the best interests of its citizens, whether it be an economic embargo or threats against our national territory. However, those same reasons have made me an advocate for the inalienable right of the Cuban people, or of any other people for that matter, to shape its future and manage its own affairs through representative institutions and elected officials. The latter are chosen in truly free and fair democratic elections. During such elections, different ideas are debated and organized movements and parties, with differing political platforms and social proposals, vie for power. I believe that only then can a people exercise its right to choose whatever suits them best. Therefore, I am against any form of dictatorship or totalitarian system, whether it be led by the so-called Right, or by what is designated as the Left. I certainly do not share the opinion that democracy is a luxury reserved for the rich.

I will not beat around the bush to express my strong conviction that racism is our country's most serious and tenacious problem. It has stood the test of time and is constantly on the rise. It is a phenomenon that gains new ground and expands its influence over our body politic, cultural life and economy.

Notwithstanding the grandiose but vacuous speeches, or bombastic but no less deceitful declarations on the alleged elimination of racism and racial discrimination, wherever we look in socialist Cuba our eyes are confronted with a cobweb of social and racial inequities and racial hatred against black people. No

doubt, these issues were bequeathed to us through centuries of oppression. The Revolution that empowered itself in 1959 merely inherited them. However, the revolutionary leaders showed themselves particularly inept at correctly interpreting that reality. In the final analysis, these leaders were men and women from the white middle class that had always dominated the country, monopolized its political life and determined the direction of its economy.

Rather than destroy the legacy of white supremacy and its concomitant racism, the Revolutionary government contributed to solidify and expand it. It did so, when it declared the nonexistence of racism, the end to racial discrimination and the advent of a “post-racial” socialist democracy in Cuba. Therefore, the leaders of the Revolution that enacted so many beneficial social changes for our country, and the people who wholeheartedly supported the revolutionary process, were hostage to the same brutal past birthed by racial slavery. The latter was imposed on the Americas by Europeans and from its monstrous womb emerged a racist society. As a consequence, Cuba is a country that speaks with two totally different voices, one White and one Black, although at specific moments of our common history, these voices have spoken in unison.

Mr. President,

Socialist Cuba is the only country in the world to have publicly proclaimed it had eliminated racism and racial discrimination and empowered its Black population. As a result, the revolutionary government repressed, persecuted and forced into exile those blacks, whether intellectuals or working class, who argued the contrary. The latter were forced into labor camps, prisons, mental hospitals or driven out of the country. They were branded "reverse racists," "black racists," "counter-

revolutionaries," "agents of imperialism," and even accused of being "instruments of the CIA."

Prominent black Cuban thinkers, such as Dr. Juan René Betancourt Bencomo or Professor Walterio Carbonell, paid a heavy price for having challenged the racial doctrine erected by the State and maintained for five decades. That doctrine consisted of denying the existence of racial oppression and racism in Cuba under the Revolution. Nowadays, many eyes are trained on this supposed "post-racial democracy", as people seek to understand why the revolutionary regime destroyed those who refused to endorse this "Big Lie."

In Cuba, the Revolution succeeded in demolishing the old privileges of a corrupt oligarchy that was submissive to foreign interests. But, to this day, the Black population, now a majority in the country, is unwillingly confined to playing second fiddle. Some Black notables do ascend to visibility, but only do so with the blessing of the dominant white elite. This merely confirms the subordinate station of blacks in Cuba after 50 years of Socialist Revolution. Such is the reality and to deny it is to perpetuate the "Big Lie."

Racism is the last frontier of hatred among humans and *race* the most profound and lasting divide. Racism determines who enjoys predetermined entitlements and privileges; it is about a racially protected access to society's resources. It equally determines who is to be denied access. In Cuba, as throughout the world, racism is an arrangement whereby resources are racially differentiated and selectively distributed. It is the *racial monopoly of political power* that allows it to self-perpetuate as a structure of racial entitlements. Therefore, we are addressing a permanent *modus operandi*, not an anomaly. This structure of total power *works*

*wonderfully well* to ensure the permanent domination of one race over another, and operates to the absolute detriment of the latter.

Power in Cuba is White. Racial discrimination against black Cubans is strengthening day by day and becoming more pervasive. Why is this so? Racism is constantly being reinforced in Cuba, and everywhere else, for the same exact reason; **because it works**. It works on behalf of those who on account of racism benefit from the privileges and entitlements accrued to their race. Were it not so, racism would have vanished from our landscape thousands of years ago.

Mr. President:

The purpose of this letter is to contribute to the current debate in our country about our nation's future at this juncture of its existence. Cuba must now meet the challenges of the new millennium with truly innovative policies to solve the problems afflicting its society. With this purpose in mind, I propose a set of minimum measures that seem necessary to jump-start a process whereby, ultimately, antiracist and nationalist Cubans will challenge and overcome the burden of the past. That past is evident in the racial inequalities and inequities that weaken national unity, particularly when Cuba, for the first time, has the possibility to peacefully resolve its 50-year old quarrel with the United States.

But it would be hypocritical and immoral to demand the end of the embargo/blockade the U.S. unfairly imposed on Cuba, without the leaders of Cuba also committing to lift the embargo/blockade that was imposed on the majority of the country's population since the beginning of the Revolution. Both

embargoes/blockades should be simultaneously lifted, without preconditions from either side.

This letter is meant to contribute to the above, so that our country, now under your control, may find the best way to achieve a consensus that could cement our national unity. As a first step, I specifically suggest that the government, without further delay, embark on the following measures:

- Establishment of a social state of legal rights as a precondition of democratic exercise of Cuban citizenship; prohibition of all discriminatory practices, be of political, gender, race, sexual orientation or religious affiliations.
- Freedom for all political prisoners in Cuba, and for those prisoners of conscience.
- Lifting of the ban which was established against the Black organizations or “Sociedades de Color,” historic institutions that are part of the cultural heritage of Black Cubans and that constitute essential differentiated spaces for Blacks in Cuba.
- Restoration of the rights to exist and to organize for Black groups, in accordance with the rights to exist in Cuba of organizations that represent other ethnic groups (such as the Chinese, Basque, Galician, Jewish and the Arabs); approval for any Black organization (cultural, social, sports, student,

political or artistic in nature) aimed at combating racism and racial discrimination.

- Rehabilitation of all Black historical figures and banned Black thinkers dead or silenced throughout the history of Cuba, before and after the Revolution.
- Publication of the works by black militants who advocated for the cessation of racism and racial discrimination in Cuba (Rafael Serra, Evaristo Estenoz, Pedro Ivonet, Ramon Vasconcelos, Gustavo Urrutia, Juan Rene Betancourt Bencomo, Walterio Carbonell,...)
- Official condemnation of the genocide perpetrated by the Cuban state in 1912 against the black population, a fact that to date the state has not officially recognized; rehabilitation of the political agenda of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) and its historic leaders, (Evaristo Estenoz, Pedro Ivonet, and others) for the sake of the restoration of the historic national memory.
- Approval for the creation of autonomous national body of Black Cubans, in the form of a National Foundation for promoting economic development of the Black Population (FUNAFEN), to address the grave socioeconomic problems confronting Black Cubans. This new organization would be able to obtain funds from the Cuban government and from international sources to improve the housing conditions in the poorest neighborhoods, create new

programs earmarked for specific professional training for young Afro-Cubans to prepare them for the demands of the national and global economy.

- Adoption by the Cuban state of new measures with regard to the remittances from abroad, an estimated 1.5 billion dollars yearly, of which less than 15% reach the hands of the black population. Adoption of a tax burden on these remittances that is currently 20%, and it should be 10%. Fifty percent of the latter tax collected by the government should be automatically awarded to the FUNAFEN, reference to the fact that remittances from abroad are conducive to the soaring of racial inequalities in Cuba.
- Authorization for the convening of a National Congress on Racism and Racial Discrimination by autonomous organizations within Cuba, without interference from the branches of power.
- Authorization for Afro-Cuban intellectuals and activists to participate in a *Roundtable of Cuban nationalists from inside the island and the Diaspora*, with the aim of discussing strategies to combat racism in Cuba.
- Authorization to create a *National Overseer* to monitor the racial situation in Cuba and to act on behalf of the elimination of racially discriminatory practices of all types, whether in governmental agencies or in the private spheres.

- Adoption of measures and concrete policies that bring dignity and respect to the phenotypes associated with the Black race which is object of denigration and ridicule, especially in the cases of Black women; positive projection of the afro-Cuban phenotype in all major medium of communication, cultural manifestations and forms of artistic representation, in order to counter the racist derision reserved massively to the racial traits associated with African descent (nose, lips, skin color, hair, body type, etc.).
- Formal criminalization of racism and racial discrimination in all areas of national life without the right to bail, as it has been established in Brazil through the Cao Law; proposal to the Cuban National Assembly for new legislation specifically designed to punish any type of discriminatory manifestation or racial humiliation in public or in private spaces.
- Overwhelming recognition of the Black woman, and her extraordinary contribution to the national dignity, for she has suffered and continues to endure doubly the consequences of racial and gender discrimination; launching of a national campaign for the re-assessment of the Afro-Cuban female phenotype.
- Authorization to create a self-governing *Organization for Afro-Cuban Women* totally independent of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), and with the permission and capacity to raise funds domestically and abroad.

- Recognition of the existence of organic majorities in Cuba, with particular attention to race and gender, that will have been reflected in all government units that affect political decision, economic and cultural life, given that an estimated 60% of the population in Cuba is of African origin.
- Creation of a mechanism that can guarantee the progressive representation of Black Cubans at all levels and instances of the country, and that, to begin, must reach the 35% within the next five years in all key positions of the Party, the Government, the Parliament, and the Mass organizations, the leadership of the Armed Forces and of the Ministry of the Interior, mass communication organizations (especially television and movie), the tourist industry, and the mixed organizations (firms) created with foreign capital.
- Official recognition and respect to all Afro-Cuban religions, recognizing them equal to other religions in Cuba, through the installation of a mechanism of permanent dialogue between the political leadership of Cuba and those religions, as it has effectively been done with Christian religions. Placing Afro-Cuban religions in the place legitimately theirs, would push forward the process of national and cultural identity.
- Immediate end to all official and unofficial practices that lead to the commodification, folklorization and exploitation of Afro-Cuban religions

toward touristic ends, attaching adequate legal consequences to prevent discrimination of these religions, befitting a secular country.

- Imposition by law of the teaching of the history of Africa and of all peoples of African origin in the Americas, akin to Law 10639/03 in Brazil.
- Publication of all world recognized reference books that elucidate the history of Africa in all aspects, and those that also bring to light the history of racism.
- Development of studies and research about Afro-Cuban issues in history and in society, with the goal of strengthening national unity and raise the self-esteem of Blacks; creation of departments for Afro-Cuban studies at the universities in Cuba, and of centers for the studies of international ethnic-racial studies.
- Implementation of public policies of affirmative action, as a global strategy capable of bringing socioeconomic equality to those citizens who due to their racial origin and because they are descendants of formerly enslaved populations in Cuba, have suffered disadvantages historically construed. This affirmative action policy would be a concrete way to bring about some type of moral reparation to the Black population in Cuba.
- Implementation of a national census based on modern scientific expertise, given the fact that the census results of the last fifty years do not merit any

trust. The new national census would develop a base from which it will be possible to evaluate the extent to which social inequities have disproportionately affected the Afro-Cuban population

Mr. President,

Personally, I am satisfied that you are aware of the gravity of the moment. I am sure you are also aware of the limited options that any leader in your position would have at this crucial time. Nonetheless, you do enjoy a number of favorable circumstances that can be exploited if the goal is to save the social gains that the people of Cuba achieved through the Revolution of 1959. For instance, I consider it beneficial, both for you and for our nation, that you are not the traditional charismatic leader. In contrast, this allows you to be a pragmatic and realistic head of state, who is capable of recognizing danger when he sees it.

I am convinced that the many Intelligence networks at your command, as well as the myriad research units the revolutionary regime created over the years, to analyze social changes in Cuba and test the pulse of its population, has provided you with enough empirical data to conclude that *something new is taking place in the collective consciousness of Black Cubans on the island*. This “something” may not be satisfied except through the effective empowerment of blacks, as a people, acting through *independent grassroots organizations*.

The time has come to drastically and expeditiously change the situation of blacks in Cuba. Those who never held power and continue to confront enormous problems in their daily survival, feel a sense of urgency. Profound changes have to

be effected now. There can be no more excuses or strategies to postpone a real change that could dramatically, comprehensively and permanently alter the socio-racial panorama of Cuban society. There is no time to waste. Every minute of delay is an open door to unforeseen situations that could become uncontrollable once they materialize.

It is dangerous to continue pretending that "Blacks in Cuba have no interest in power," and to further postpone the enactment of measures that would *really empower* those who constitute Cuba's majority. The possibility of a complete break with the past is within your reach. So is the opportunity to do what no leader before you has dared to do: *to work for the effective empowerment of those who, for more than three hundred years, have been living in a state of Permanent Emergency.*

I have spoken on my behalf, and only in my name. However, I know that the opinions expressed in this letter are echoed by ideas that are being increasingly formulated in Cuba.

I know that you know it, too.

Respectful nationalist regards.

Carlos Moore  
Ethnologist and Professor of International Relations