

# *President Raúl Castro Says Cuba “Will Remain Free, Sovereign and Independent”*

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Following are the closing remarks by Cuban President Raúl Castro, during Thursday's plenary session of the Cuban Parliament in Havana. (Taken from Granma International)

Compañeras and compañeros:

It is my responsibility to make the closing remarks for this last Period of Ordinary Sessions of the National Assembly of People's Power's 8th Legislature. On this occasion, I will address several topics of national and international relevance.

Between September 8 and 10, the country was struck by Hurricane Irma, described as the most powerful and violent extreme weather event in the history of the Atlantic Ocean, which impacted, to one degree or another, 12 provinces, with strong winds, heavy rain, and severe coastal flooding.

Despite the enormous effort conducted to safeguard the population, that included the protection of more than 1.8 million persons, we were obliged to mourn the loss of 10 compatriots. More than 179,000 dwellings were affected and significant damage caused to infrastructure, national health

system buildings, educational centers, the sugar industry, tourist facilities, and communications. For the first time ever, the national electrical grid was interrupted across the entire country

In summary, damage caused by Hurricane Irma was calculated at 13,000,185,000 pesos, a figure produced on the basis of parity between the peso and the U.S. dollar.

Once again, made evident was the spirit of resistance and victory of our people, who confronted the event and the recovery period with organization, unity, discipline, and solidarity.

Within only 20 days, electrical service and water distribution were restored throughout the national territory, an effort in which, along with specialized forces, standing out were mixed support brigades, organized in every municipality, to undertake clean-up, pruning of trees, opening of trenches, and transportation of utility poles, supporting the workers who took on the task of reestablishing electrical service.

Likewise, in only 62 days, all damage to tourist facilities was repaired, to ensure that they were ready to offer their services before the beginning of the high season.

No one was left to their fate. The revolutionary government took a series of measures to facilitate the acquisition of construction materials and consumer goods of basic necessity by those affected.

We were able to maintain educational and health care services, assuring epidemiological stability.

Advancing are different housing construction programs to build stronger, more resistant dwellings in the most severely affected communities, which will be maintained as one of the principal priorities in the National Economic Plan for next year and in the future. In this sense, local resources available to accelerate a solution to this longstanding problem must be augmented.

To be fair, we must recognize the role played by the strategic regions and their respective chief officers; provincial and municipal defense councils led by high-ranking leaders of the Party and government at these levels, and at the defense zone level; mass organizations; the Revolutionary Armed Forces; the Ministry of the Interior; and other agencies of the Central State Administration.

The results achieved in confronting the hurricane, and the accumulated impact of similar extreme weather events in recent years, confirm the relevance and value of our concept of people's war, and the organization of the provincial defense system and its systematic improvement, as pillars supporting our ability to resist and overcome any event or threat, regardless of whether it is of natural origin, or any other kind. (Applause).

This is an opportunity to reiterate, in the name of the Cuban people, our deepest gratitude for the help and countless expressions of support arriving from all parts of the planet, from heads of state and government, political organizations, solidarity movements, and friends of Cuba.

Moving on to another issue, I will take advantage of the occasion to mention the successful holding of the first stage of the general elections process, in which delegates to Municipal Assemblies of People's Power were elected, constituted this past Sunday, December 17.

Once again our people turned out massively to exercise their right to vote, reaching a participation level of 89.02% in the first round, a figure similar to that of the previous process.

At the same time, the quality of the vote was greater, in comparison to the elections held in 2015, reaching a higher percentage of valid ballots, with fewer voided or blank.

The process was characterized by greater preparation, organization, and cohesion in the work done by electoral authorities at different levels, state institutions, mass organizations, social associations, and citizens.

In fact, the process constituted a massive demonstration of the people's support and confidence in the Revolution and socialist democracy, as well as a worthy tribute to our historic leader, and this must be the case in the second stage, which will be convoked shortly.

As was explained, given the severe damage caused by Hurricane Irma, right in the middle of the direct nomination of delegate candidates phase, we found ourselves obliged to modify the dates set for the elections of delegates to Municipal Assemblies of People's Power.

As a consequence, today, in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic, this Assembly agreed to extend the terms of delegates to Provincial Assemblies and National Assembly of People's Power deputies, meaning that the new Parliament will not be installed February 24, as is customary, but on April 19, coinciding with the date of the triumph at Playa Girón, the first great victory of socialism, already proclaimed by Fidel.

During this session, accountability reports were presented by the Attorney General's Office and the People's Supreme Court, bodies which - given the important role they play in strengthening institutionality and social discipline - require support and ongoing attention in carrying out the missions with which they are charged, while respecting their authority, independence, and strictly abiding by the decisions they make. At the same time, ethical behavior and unwavering commitment to the people and the Revolution must be demanded of their personnel.

Evident in these reports were the advances made by both institutions in fulfilling the responsibilities with which they are charged in the Constitution.

Since this past Tuesday, deputies have been informed extensively of the country's economic situation, which frees me from the need to address the subject in detail.

Speaking in December last year before this Assembly, I warned that financial tensions and challenges would continue in 2017, and could even grow worse. Nonetheless, we projected retaking an ascending path in the national economy's performance and achieving moderate growth in the Gross Domestic Product of 2%.

As was explained over the course of this session, the GDP maintained a positive direction, showing growth of 1.6%, an outcome that may not satisfy us but was achieved in a context aggravated by financial restrictions and insufficient availability of fuel, to which was added the significant impact of a severe three-year drought, and the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Irma, to which I have already referred.

Neither can we overlook the effect of the economic, commercial, financial blockade of the United States government, which not only remains in full force after 56 years, but has been tightened under the new administration.

The economy's modest growth was favored by positive trends in tourism, a sector in which a new record of 4.7 million international visitors will be established; as well as increases in transportation, communications, agriculture, and construction, fundamentally.

The principal programs of investment linked to the development of infrastructure and the broadening of external sources of income performed at an acceptable level.

Amidst financial tensions, the vitality of social services provided to Cubans free of charge was assured.

Likewise, the domestic financial equilibrium was maintained, with greater supplies in the network of retail stores, which while still insufficient, allows for a better response to the population's growing demand.

The Economic Plan and State Budget for 2018, approved today by this parliament, estimate growth of the Gross Domestic Product in the area of 2%, which presupposes the efficient use of financial resources and materials available; raising income from exports; increasing national production, in particular of food; without renouncing development programs that are underway to generate income and new sources of employment.

Next year will also be complicated in terms of the nation's external finances. Nevertheless, we will maintain the firm intention of gradually recuperating international credibility in our economy.

I will take advantage of the opportunity to reiterate, to our creditors, our intention of fulfilling all commitments assumed in the different processes of restructuring our external debt.

We will continue the effort to gradually reduce the list of current overdue payments owed our suppliers, whom we thank for their support and understanding of the transitory difficulties we face.

We must likewise consolidate the incipient participation of foreign investment in our economy, which showed greater results over the course of 2017, but is clearly still insufficient.

During the day, today, deputies evaluated progress in the implementation of the Economic and Social Policy Guidelines of the Party and the Revolution, as we did yesterday in the Central Committee Plenum.

During the period analyzed, the process of drafting the final versions of the programmatic documents presented to the 7th Party Congress was completed, and progress in the implementation of approved policies was considered in a critical spirit, on the basis of experience gained, with the objective of correcting deviations and violations which came to light.

Intensive work has been done in the drafting of legal norms to perfect the functioning of non-state forms of management, that is self-employment and the experimental non-agricultural cooperatives.

It is important, in this sense, to reiterate that we do not renounce the deployment and development of non-state forms of management in our economy. Nor will we pull back or come to a halt, but we must ensure respect for the law, secure positive results, and firmly confront illegalities and the violation of current policy; in other words, we must ensure that the changes in this sphere are implemented well, and resolutely rectify any deviation that distances us from the chosen path.

At the same time, the approved measures have been established for the gradual transformation and perfection of the state enterprise system, which as we all know is the main form of ownership in the national socialist economy.

In recent days, the new legal regulations on the Cuban enterprise system were issued, which represents another step toward the goal of separating state and business functions and increasing efficiency and organization, granting greater autonomy in its management.

Currently, training and dissemination actions are being carried out to facilitate the implementation of the published legal norms.

Although the elimination of the dual currency and exchange system by itself will not magically resolve all the accumulated problems in the Cuban economy, it constitutes the most decisive step to advance in the updating of the economic model, due to the impact that it will have in all spheres of the economic and social endeavors of the nation. Without solving this, it is difficult to advance correctly.

In this period, efforts have been reinforced and intensified with greater comprehensiveness and scope, such that we are capable of, at the same time that we unify the currency system, overcoming the existing distortions in terms of subsidies, prices, and wholesale and retail rates and, as is logical, pensions and salaries in the state sector of the economy.

No one can calculate, not even the wisest of the wise among us, the elevated cost that the persistence of the dual currency and exchange system has meant for the state sector, which favors the unfair inverted pyramid, where greater responsibility is met with lower compensation, and not all capable citizens are motivated to work legally, while the promotion to higher positions of the best and most skilled workers and cadres is discouraged, some of whom migrate to the non-state sector.

I must admit that this matter has taken us too long and we can not delay its solution any longer.  
(Applause)

As on other occasions, I think it appropriate now to make a brief assessment of some of the main foreign policy issues.

In 2017 we have witnessed a serious, irrational deterioration in relations between the United States and Cuba. Our country is not at all responsible for this setback, marked by the tightening of the blockade, the return of aggressive and disrespectful rhetoric, and the arbitrary application of unjustified measures that significantly affect ties between peoples and families, as well as the rights and freedoms of Cubans and U.S. citizens.

The decisions adopted by the United States government in recent months, not only interrupted the process initiated on the sovereign decision of both countries to move toward a new type of relationship, for the first time in their history, based on respect and civilized coexistence, but have opened new fronts of tension.

In this setback, the United States again resorts to the artificial fabrication of pretexts to justify the return to failed and universally rejected policies.

I categorically reiterate that Cuba had and has no responsibility whatsoever in the incidents that allegedly affected the health of accredited diplomats or other foreign visitors.

The results of the Cuban and U.S. investigations, which until now have not found the slightest evidence of the causes or origin of the health conditions described, confirm as such.

It was not Cuba that established new prohibitions on the already very limited economic, commercial, and financial ties between the two countries, or who has once again restricted the right of U.S. citizens to visit our country and Cubans to the United States, or harmed the functioning of embassies, with negative consequences for migratory relations, exchanges, and travel between the two nations.

We must not forget that the policy adopted by the new government of the United States is opposed by the American people and the international community, which was clearly expressed on November 1 in the United Nations General Assembly on voting, almost unanimously, with the exception of the United States and Israel, in favor of the resolution presented by our country on the need for the U.S. government to put an end to its economic, commercial and financial blockade, which the Cuban people have suffered for almost 56 years.

Neither does it have the support of the majority of Cuban émigrés, who are also affected by decisions that only favor minority, reactionary sectors, historically interested in leading the two countries toward a confrontation.

For our part, we have made efforts and will continue working to preserve, to the extent possible, the spaces for exchange and cooperation established in recent years and, as I have said repeatedly, Cuba is willing to continue negotiating pending bilateral issues with the United States, on the basis of equality and respect for the sovereignty and independence of our country, and continue the respectful dialogue and cooperation on issues of common interest with the U.S. government.

The Cuban Revolution has withstood the onslaught of 11 U.S. administrations of different kinds and here we are and will remain, free, sovereign and independent. (Applause)

Our Latin American and Caribbean region is suffering imperialist and oligarchic attacks with the aim of turning back history and destroying the advances achieved by popular forces in recent years.

The Bolivarian Revolution faces an unconventional war imposed by its external enemies and internal coup-plotting sectors.

The results of the recent electoral processes ratify the legitimacy and democratic character of the government led by constitutional President Nicolás Maduro Moros and the civil-military union.

We reject the unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States, Canada, and the European Union, and the external interference against Venezuela's Bolivarian Chavista process, which threaten the peace and dialogue between Venezuelans, with destabilizing purposes, and generate economic hardship for the population.

Certain governments of the hemisphere, in complicity with officials of the discredited OAS, are trying to crush Venezuela. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America reiterated, through the declaration of its Political Council, meeting in Havana in recent days, that we will remain united.

The Cuban Revolution suffered similar stages for decades, and even worse on some occasions. With that experience and faithful to our principles, we reiterate our unwavering solidarity with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

We will maintain cooperation with the Venezuelan government and people, even under the most adverse circumstances.

We will do everything in our power to fulfill the revolutionary duty of contributing to the victory of the Bolivarian Chavista Revolution. (Applause)

We will never be unfaithful to the loyalty and gratitude that we feel toward President Hugo Chávez Frías for his support and solidarity in difficult moments.

Likewise, we reiterate our support to Senator Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who, as you know, was president of Argentina, and former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, today harassed by the oligarchy with politically motivated legal proceedings.

In this increasingly complex scenario, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have a duty to move toward the political, economic and social integration of Our America. As I have stated in various forums, working for "unity within diversity" is an imperative need.

Cuba will spare no effort to ensure that CELAC, as a genuinely Latin American and Caribbean mechanism, continues to promote the common interests of the region. In this regard, the postulates of the Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace should continue to be the benchmark in relations between CELAC countries and between the rest of the world and our states.

As has been reported, a few days ago we held the Sixth CARICOM-Cuba Summit in Antigua and Barbuda, which demonstrated not only the high level of relations between Caribbean nations and our country, but also the importance of the mutual cooperation and solidarity that we have maintained for decades.

I wish to reiterate our continued support to our Caribbean brothers and sisters, victims of devastating natural phenomena such as Hurricanes Irma and Maria. At the same time, we demand fair and differentiated treatment for the states of the Caribbean, which today suffer the dramatic effects of climate change, and we reaffirm our conviction that this phenomenon must be faced decisively by all.

To the same extent that its disastrous consequences are revealed, the position of the President of the United States to withdraw from the Paris Agreement becomes even more incoherent, in contrast to the attitude of the rest of the international community, gathered in France on December 12 at the Summit convened by President Emmanuel Macron and the United Nations.

I consider it necessary to dedicate a few words to the situation in Palestine.

I reiterate our profound concern and rejection of the unilateral decision of the United States government to recognize the city of Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel, which constitutes a serious violation of United Nations resolutions on the subject, and of international law.

This measure, broadly condemned by the international community, further exacerbates tensions in the area and dispels the possibility of any effort aimed at resuming peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

We reaffirm our unconditional support for the search for a comprehensive, just, and lasting solution to the conflict, based on the creation of two states, which ensures the exercise of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, and to an independent state within the pre-1967 borders, with its capital in East Jerusalem.

Finally, I reiterate with all my energy and conviction that our country will continue to maintain its principled positions in all aspects of international relations, in favor of the rights of the peoples, of peace, justice, and solidarity with the best causes of humanity. (Applause)

Finally, compañeras and compañeros, I wish to reaffirm what I have already expressed in the Sixth and Seventh Party Congresses about the benefit of limiting the nation's principal positions to two five-year terms. Consequently, when the National Assembly of People's Power is constituted on April 19 of next year, my second and last term leading the state and the government will conclude, and Cuba will have a new president.

It only remains for me to wish you and all our people the warmest congratulations on the occasion of the New Year, year 60 of the Revolution.

Thank you very much.

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