

U.S. Department of State

Diplomacy in Action

Cuba Internet Task Force Meeting Minutes, February 7, 2018

[\(/documents/organization/279259.pdf\)](/documents/organization/279259.pdf)

Meeting: Inaugural Meeting of the Cuba Internet Task Force

Date: Wednesday, February 7, 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Location: Department of State, Harry S. Truman Building, Room 1406

Chair: Deputy Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs John Creamer

In Attendance: Task Force Members

Learned Dees, Acting Director, Office of International Communications and Information Policy, Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Department of State

Catherine Newling, Deputy Director, Office of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Department of State

Sharon Sadler-Gray, Director, Office of Cuban Affairs, U.S. Agency for International Development

Andre Mendes, Acting Director and Chief Information Officer, Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Broadcasting Board of Governors

Tom Sullivan, Chief, International Bureau, Federal Communications Commission

Fiona Alexander, Associate Administrator, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Department of Commerce

Gilberto Torres-Vela, Office of Cuban Affairs, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State (Executive Secretary)

Carlos Ponce, Director of Latin America and the Caribbean, Freedom House

Ashley Friedman, Senior Director of Global Policy, Information Technology Industry Council

Other U.S. Government Representatives

Rachel Alpert, Office of the Legal Adviser, Department of State

Kevin Murakami, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Erica Magallon, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Jessica Huaracayo, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

Melissa Quartell, Western Hemisphere Affairs, Department of State

John Piletich, Economic and Business Affairs, Department of State

Public

Pablo Arcuri

Libby Bloxom

Enrique Bravo-Escobar

Jose Cardenas

Beatriz Casals

Tony Costa

Rodolfo Davalos

Maria Fernandez Garcia

Andrew Fishbein

Kendra Gaither

Eric Gettig

Elise Goss-Alexander

Gabrielle Jorgensen

Sam Kellogg

Cheryl LaBash

Samantha Leahy

Jose Luis Leyva

Mario Felix Leonart Barroso

Felix Yuniel Llerena Lopez

Antonio Martinez II

Muir McCammon

Philip Peters

Aimel Rios Wong

Frances Rogers

Prosser Stirling

Eduardo Soren Triff

Olivia Wagner

Media

Carmen Rodriguez - Radio Marti

Aldo Gamboa - Agence France-Presse

Elizabeth Mendez – Al Jazeera International

Josh Lederman - Associated Press

Opening

The Chair convened the inaugural meeting of the Cuba Internet Task Force at 10:30 a.m.

Legal Framework for the Cuba Internet Task Force

Rachel Alpert, of the Department of State's Office of the Legal Adviser, provided an overview of the legal framework for the Cuba Internet Task Force (CITF), which is a Presidential Advisory Committee under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The CITF will work to ensure that advice is formulated in a way that is open to public participation, and public documents of the CITF will be posted on the CITF website.

Introductory Remarks

The Chair delivered general opening remarks on the purpose of the CITF as directed by the National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) on Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba, and provided a snapshot on internet access in Cuba. He emphasized the CITF is an advisory committee, with neither operational nor programmatic capabilities or responsibilities. The Chair said the CITF will ultimately deliver a report with recommendations to the Secretary of State and the White House. He emphasized the importance of the Internet to creating a vibrant, democratic society with government accountability, and urged attendees to assist the CITF in compiling practical, implementable, near-term goals for expanding Internet access and the free and unregulated flow of information in Cuba.

Each Task Force member then delivered brief remarks explaining his/her organization's role related to Internet freedom and access.

Catherine Newling, of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the Department of State, said the low Internet penetration in Cuba was a political decision by the Cuban government. She noted the hourly price of Internet was too expensive relative to Cubans' wages, making it out of reach for most citizens.

Tom Sullivan, of the Federal Communications Commission, spoke about the FCC's focus on promoting robust and affordable connections to close the "digital divide." He said there was no direct undersea cable system between the United States and Cuba, but noted five U.S. telecommunications carriers had agreements with the Cuban state telecommunications company, ETECSA.

Ashley Friedman, of the Information Technology Industry Council, spoke of the power of technology to transform societies and economies, and said increased Internet connectivity could boost Cuba's healthcare, agricultural, and tourism sectors, as well as provide additional opportunities for Cuban entrepreneurs.

Learned Dees, of the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs at the Department of State, offered the example of the State Department signing an agreement with the Dominican Republic on emergency preparedness response, and said the Bureau stands by to support Cuba in disaster mitigation planning, systems resilience, and restoring connectivity after hurricanes or other natural disasters.

Sharon Sandler-Gray, of the U.S. Agency for International Development, said unfettered access to the Internet is fundamental to supporting Cuba's civil society, protecting human rights, and encouraging an independent press. She spoke in particular about the need for safe communication protocols for independent journalists.

Fiona Alexander, of the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), said NTIA's experience in expanding Internet access domestically through its Broadband USA initiative could be helpful to Cuba as it plans to expand its Internet expansion.

Carlos Ponce, of Freedom House, said Cuba ranks fifth worst globally in Internet freedom, only behind Iran, Syria, Ethiopia, and China, but noted that the expansion of Wi-Fi hotspots has been very important to bloggers, activists, and entrepreneurs who are using innovative technologies to fight censorship.

Andre Mendes, of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), stated the Cuban government's efforts to keep information from its citizens was typical of all dictatorships, and OCB's sole purpose is to provide information to the Cuban people.

Administrative Business of the CITF

The Chair proposed the creation of two CITF subcommittees. Each would collect comments and recommendations and submit a draft report for the CITF to consider within six months (August 2018). One subcommittee would explore and develop recommendations on the role of the media and the free, unregulated flow of information through independent media in Cuba. The second subcommittee would explore and develop recommendations expanding internet access in Cuba.

The members of the task force agreed with the proposal, and committed to establishing two subcommittees.

The members of the task force furthermore agreed to consider input from the subcommittees' respective reports and comments from the public to draft a final report to the Secretary of State within six months of receiving the subcommittees' reports (anticipated in February 2019), with recommendations on expanding internet access in Cuba and encouraging freedom of expression through independent media and internet freedom.

The Chair suggested the next meeting take place in October 2018. The meeting will be advertised in the Federal Register and be open to the public. The members of the task force agreed.

Public Comments

The Chair opened the floor to oral statements from members of the public in attendance. The meeting was open to the public on a first-come, first-served RSVP basis. Twenty-seven members of the public attended. Additionally, four representatives of news outlets attended.

The following 11 members of the public provided three-minute oral statements during the meeting: Antonio Martinez II, Frances Rogers, Rodolfo Davalos, Cheryl LaBash, Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, Andrew Fishbein, Tony Costa, Philip Peters, Felix Yuniel Llerena Lopez, Beatriz Casals, and Jose Luis Leyva.

Members of the public generally stated that Cuba's low Internet penetration was unsatisfactory and lauded the goal of increasing Internet access and freedom in Cuba. They agreed this was important to supporting entrepreneurs, religious organizations, civil society, activists, and independent media. Some, however, argued the CITF would be counterproductive because it would feed the Cuban government's distrust of U.S. efforts to increase internet penetration, and said the most effective way to achieve these goals would be to let the private sector and the power of the market drive Internet expansion. They said as Cubans become more prosperous they will demand more information and better Internet access. The U.S. government's role in expanding Internet should be minimized. Some acknowledged the pace of change was too slow but noted the Cuban government has already made important strides on its own in increasing Internet penetration, and will likely continue to do so without U.S. government intervention.

Some members of the public stated that the CITF should not be dissuaded by accusations of “intervention,” and said the U.S. government must be involved in bringing about change. Several said the CITF’s priority must be in assisting with Internet freedom and access for dissidents, rather than pursuing opportunities for the U.S. private sector to expand connectivity infrastructure. They argued, for instance, that U.S. private companies should not be allowed to enter the Cuban telecommunications market because of Cuba’s exploitative labor hiring mechanisms. They furthermore argued that any Internet-related business deals with Cuba will only enrich the Cuban government, and not benefit the Cuban people.

Some public comments did not closely address the mandate of the CITF, but instead referred to other topics such as staffing levels at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, the broader U.S. policy toward Cuba, the effectiveness of the embargo, and certified property claims by U.S. citizens.

Adjourn

The Chair thanked the public for its participation and encouraged the public, both those present and those not in attendance, to submit additional written comments via the CITF website. He asked that the public keep a narrow focus on the mandate of the CITF, not on broader policy considerations, and encouraged practical recommendations. He also invited anyone interested in serving on an unpaid basis on a subcommittee to send a note to [**CubaITF@state.gov \(mailto:Cuba-ITF@state.gov\)**](mailto:Cuba-ITF@state.gov), stating relevant experience and interest.

Andre Mendes said he had heard from dozens of Cuban exiles and dissidents who supported the creation of the CITF.

Carlos Ponce reminded the group the CITF’s role is to submit recommendations, not change Cuba’s ideology or fix Cuba’s problems.

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 12:00 pm.

Minutes certified on February 21, 2018 2/21/18 by John Creamer, Chair

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