

VAL DEMINGS

10TH DISTRICT, FLORIDA

WASHINGTON OFFICE

217 CANNON HOB
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515
(202) 225-2176

ORLANDO OFFICE

2295 S. HIAWASSEE ROAD, SUITE 301
ORLANDO, FL 32835
(321) 388-9808



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

**PERMANENT SELECT
COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE**

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE
AND WARFIGHTER SUPPORT

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTELLIGENCE MODERNIZATION AND READINESS

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
CRIME, TERRORISM, AND HOMELAND SECURITY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ANTITRUST,
COMMERCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE LAW

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
AND MARITIME SECURITY

July 28, 2021

The Honorable Lisa Peterson
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Peterson:

On July 11, after 62 years of deprivation, intimidation, and violence at the hands of the illegitimate communist regime, Cubans understand that opposing the Communist Party of Cuba is not without great risk – including death – but on July 11th they still marched for human rights and freedom.

As expected, the regime responded with violence and indiscriminate detention of peaceful protestors. With the support of authoritarian allies, the regime also sought to block access to social media and the free and open internet. However, more than a decade of U.S. investments in anti-censorship technology has helped ensure that Cubans can communicate with the free world, receive unbiased reporting, and document human rights violations in real time.

On July 22, President Biden stated without equivocation that the “United States stands with the brave Cubans who have taken to the streets to oppose 62 years of repression under a communist regime,” and committed to working with the private sector to provide unrestricted access to the internet in Cuba. I respectfully request that the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor immediately utilize all appropriated funding for the Open Technology Fund to support Cuban internet freedom.

In appropriations bills passed by Congress and signed into law for Fiscal Years (FY) 2019, 2020, and 2021, funds were designated to support rapid surges in anti-censorship network traffic during civil disorders and government crackdowns. However, it is my understanding that the previous Administration did not allocate these funds to State Department contractors and grantees in response to events in Belarus, Myanmar, Syria, Venezuela, or Nicaragua, despite networks continuing to provide a lifeline through dire conditions.

Right now, an immediate infusion of funding is critical for networks to remain fully-functional and meet surging demand. The 1.425 million daily users represent a 7100% increase in use in a 6-day span, and more than 3 million Cubans have downloaded the technology required to access the network. As the crackdown continues and more Cubans adopt the technology, greater resources will be necessary to maintain connectivity.

While the most immediate concern is preserving and growing uncensored internet access in Cuba, anti-democratic governments around the world understand that unrestricted internet access is an existential threat to their rule. Further, China, Russia, and other authoritarian governments continue to export their security apparatus to their partners. I urge you to work with the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the Open Technology Fund, and your Department of State regional counterparts to develop an internet freedom rapid response plan that can preserve internet access and scale services in real time during civil unrest.

As you know, protecting access to unbiased reporting and supporting democratic movements are American values free from partisan divide. I respectfully request a meeting or call to discuss the immediate support for Cuban internet freedom and the long-term growth of programs that can ensure our Nation remains a beacon of freedom to all who live under tyranny.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Val B. Demings". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Val Butler Demings
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

cc: Julie J. Chung, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs,
U.S. Department of State