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U.N. Hands Cuba a PR Coup

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Every five years the United Nations holds an international conference "on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders." The Eighth Congress, which starts today, was, fortunately, not scheduled for Baghdad, but the site chosen, Havana, is almost as objectionable. How this inappropriate choice for a U.N. congress on criminal justice came about illustrates the inability of the U.N. to live up to its own principles.

In 1988 Cuba let it be known that it wished to host the congress in Havana; and in May 1989 the Social Committee of the United Nations Economic and Social Council voted 43 to 2 to accept Cuba's invitation. Only the U.S. and Oman voted against.

The U.S. State Department had tried unsuccessfully to persuade the U.N. that holding the congress in Havana would give Fidel Castro's denials of human-rights violations in Cuba greater plausibility. Mr. Castro's loud insistence that Cuba was a just society had become increasingly dubious after reports from Amnesty International, from Americas Watch, from the Human Rights Commission of the Economic and Social Council itself, and from a special committee of the New York City Bar Association that described injustice in Cuban courts and mistreatment in Cuban prisons. Cuba's public relations grew worse and worse as such prominent dissidents as Huber Matos and Armando Valladares, released after decades in Cuban prisons, detailed the cruel conditions of their own confinements.

Consequently, Mr. Castro wanted the crime congress held in Havana to give credibility to his claims of respecting the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. What with Third World countries that didn't worry about Cuba's human-rights abuses, Communist countries that supported Cuba automatically in 1989 although they wouldn't now, Latin American countries that voted in a spirit of hemispheric solidarity, and countries that simply wanted to get on with such trans-national crime problems as drug trafficking and hijacking, Cuba had the votes. Even such democratic countries as Canada, France and Sweden agreed to the invitation.

Some Western nations felt that the Americans were still fighting the Cold War and were not purely concerned about human rights; others hoped that, with the world press in Havana for the congress, Mr. Castro would make a flamboyant gesture. Maybe he would announce the release of a few hundred political prisoners during his welcoming address to a plenary session of the congress or while sipping cocktails at a reception for
delegates. In 1984 he acceded to Jesse Jackson's appeal for mercy and released 26 political prisoners, among them Humberto Noble Alexander, imprisoned for 22 years because his "propaganda" as a Seventh Day Adventist offended officials. Mercy for political prisoners will be welcome -- but the congress is about criminal justice, not mercy.

Suppose that the U.S. had convinced the world that, as a matter of principle, the Eighth U.N. Congress should not be held in any country with major human rights abuses, be it Cuba, Iraq or South Africa. Previous U.N. crime congresses met in countries with freedom of speech, of religion, and of association. Had the Eighth Congress been scheduled for such a country, would it have been in a better position to work for humane systems of criminal justice?

One difference is that delegates meeting in a country where freedoms are guaranteed can listen to what the general public says about crime and justice. Take the Fourth Congress, which met in August 1965 in Stockholm while the Watts riots dominated television news and not long after Nelson Mandela was arrested, tried, and sentenced to imprisonment in South Africa. Thurgood Marshall, then solicitor general of the U.S., led the American delegation. He and the other delegates from many countries presented papers and exchanged ideas about the causes of crime and how to rehabilitate offenders.

The Swedes were not impressed. Their newspapers and TV programs criticized the presence of a South African delegation led by the head of the prison system. And outside the Folkethuset, where delegates deliberated, Swedish pickets protested. The protest embarrassed the congress and may have contributed to the adoption by the General Assembly the following year of the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" and in 1975 of a "Declaration on the Protection of All Persons From Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment."

In Havana no pickets, no critical newspaper stories, no public protest will be permitted to embarrass the congress. Fidel Castro will see to that. In a country where Jehovah's Witnesses commit a major crime by mimeographing religious tracts (and are imprisoned for decades), what Cuban will dare say that Havana is not the appropriate site for a conference on criminal justice?

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