

U.S. lawmaker to present Cuba's rights record

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Rep. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., will fly to Geneva next week to bring Washington's position on human rights in Cuba before a United Nations panel.

The Cuban-American legislator, appearing at the request of President Clinton, will be the principal U.S. speaker at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights' conference on Cuba, which begins Monday.

Meanwhile, Cuban exile organizations are lining up to denounce the government of President Fidel Castro.

Sebastian Arcos, a founder of the Havana-based Cuban Committee for Human Rights, said he plans to expose "the abominable living conditions in (Cuban) prisons" and demand that "Castro permit the International Red Cross to visit the jails and assist the prisoners."

Arcos has lived in Miami since September 1995. He came to the United States for treatment of rectal cancer diagnosed while he was a political prisoner.

Ricardo Bofill, president of Arcos' group, said he will deliver to the U.N. panel a list of 471 alleged violations, including Havana's crackdown in February against Concilio Cubano, a coalition of 130 dissident groups.

"The suppression of the right to organize labor unions, the campaign against independent journalists and evangelical ministers, and the murder of Brothers to the Rescue pilots are central issues to that report," Bofill told The Herald.

His reference was to the shooting down Feb. 24 of two U.S. civilian aircraft by Cuban warplanes over the Florida Straits. Four people were killed.

Frank Calzón, Washington representative of New York City-based Freedom House, said he will raise the issue of state-sponsored persecution of independent journalists.

Other groups expected to appear include the Municipalities of Cuba in Exile, the Christian Democratic Party of Cuba and the Cuban American National Foundation.

To address the commission, activists must ask a nongovernmental institution accredited to the U.N. to yield them the necessary time. For that reason, not everyone who travels to Geneva can speak before the 53-member human rights panel.

Most exile leaders spend their time in less public activities. They meet with representatives of the member nations, deliver their reports to the commission's secretariat, or simply lobby the diplomats.

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