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Fernando Gonzalez: 'To strengthen the links of friendship around the world, that is our role'

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CUBAN Five hero Fernando Gonzalez may have spent 15 years in US prisons, but he wears his sacrifice lightly.

Along with the rest of the Five, Gonzalez was working in Florida monitoring Cuban exile groups planning terrorist attacks on his homeland when he was arrested in 1998. Like them, he spent 17 months “in the hole,” solitary confinement, before being convicted in a trial that drew international condemnation and locked up until February 27 2014.

Miami-based terrorists have killed thousands of Cubans since the 1960s in attacks such as that orchestrated by Luis Posada Carriles that brought down Cubana Flight 455 in 1976, killing 73 people.

Infiltrating such groups was clearly a dangerous mission, but Gonzalez says it “wasn’t hard” to decide to go when he was asked.

Born in 1963 and a proud “child of the revolution,” he served with Cuban troops defending the progressive Angolan government from Unita rebels in 1987-89.

He was with troops moving towards the border with Namibia — then occupied by

apartheid South Africa, which was intervening on Unita's side — at the time of the great battle of Cuito Canavale to the east, a victory credited by Nelson Mandela, among others, with the withdrawal of South African troops from Angola and which played its part in securing Namibian independence and even the final defeat of apartheid itself.

"When I returned to Cuba I was 26. I was asked if I was willing to go to the US and work on anti-terrorist activities.

"I knew about the historic terrorism against Cuba, the lives lost in attacks on our people and our embassies. I said: 'All right, if you think I can do it, I'm willing'."

He is not bitter about his arrest, though he notes that the FBI were "not sincere" in dealings with the Cuban government when asking to share information on terrorist cells in high-level exchanges that took place in 1998.

"The attitude of Cuba was to share information, though not, of course, its source," he says. "But the FBI were already aware of the source. They were not transparent. Two months later we were arrested."

The 17 months in "the hole" were "an effort to break us," he acknowledges when I ask what kept him going over 15 years in jail.

"But I had a conviction that what we had done was right, that there was nothing wrong in saving lives or defending people — not just Cubans but people all over the world, because tourists were killed in attacks.

"And I didn't take it personally. I knew the US had nothing against us personally. It could be Fernando Gonzalez behind bars or anybody else. What was happening was an expression of US hostility to Cuba, not to me.

"That perspective helped me cope — that it wasn't about me and what happened to me was not the most important thing. Our sacrifice was part of the course of history, part of something much bigger."

Gonzalez is effusive in his thanks to the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and friends in this country who wrote more letters in support of the Five than any other. International solidarity, rather than any serious change in policy by the Barack Obama presidency, was what secured their eventual release, he believes.

"The Obama concessions were simply because Washington concluded that their current policy wasn't getting them the result they wanted, so they looked at achieving their aim in a different way," he says.

"In Cuba we were happy to see any improvement. We don't gain anything from their hostility. We just want to be left alone."

"There was some improved co-operation on law enforcement, fighting drug smuggling, a few changes. But the blockade stayed in place.

"There was more rhetoric about lifting it than any real effort. Now Donald Trump is trying to roll back what advances were made."

But following the historic meeting between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, could there be hope of a similar easing of tensions with Cuba?

"Well," he muses. "It's very positive that Trump and Kim have met. It's good for peace. It's good for the Korean peninsula and the region.

"But it's ironic when combined with increased aggression in Latin America. I hope it teaches the US that, if they are willing to negotiate with another country, why not Cuba where the issues are much less complex?"

But the present reality is almost the opposite. "The left has been losing ground in Latin America, that's obvious," he says, noting the congressional coups that removed left-wing presidents in Paraguay and Brazil, the right's victory in Argentina, the current unrest orchestrated against the Nicaraguan authorities and the repeated bids to overturn the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela.

"When these countries were moving left, the US didn't sit and wait. They began to develop a counter-offensive.

"What we're seeing now is an offensive by the centres of imperialism, most important of which is Washington.

"They always find local actors, sectors of society who for reasons of self-interest are willing to work with the US, but the strategy comes from the centre.

"This didn't start with Trump. As you say, his rhetoric is more hostile — openly talking of military action against Venezuela, for example. But the reality is the same."

Gonzalez's role as president of the Cuban Institute for Friendship and Solidarity sees him work with 2,000-odd organisations in 155 countries that promote solidarity with the socialist country as well as co-ordinate Cuba's own solidarity to other countries, as expressed in medical missions, emergency responses and the many other acts of humanity that make this Caribbean island loom so large on the world stage. He was also elected to Cuba's parliament in March.

"To strengthen those links of friendship around the world, that is our role," he says, "as well as to campaign on political causes — a free Palestine, an independent Puerto Rico."

This work is so important to him because of the role solidarity played in their release.

“The Cuba Solidarity Campaign played a key role and today” (I met him at the CSC AGM) “showed the organisation and planning that goes into this important work on ending the blockade, putting pressure on the US to end its occupation of Guantanamo.

“It is well organised and strong. You fought hard for us and in part that is why we were released — a victory for you as well as us.

“I include the Morning Star in that for publishing information about our case other papers wouldn’t touch. Reading it in prison showed us we were not alone and, when we passed the paper on, many inmates would come back to us and say: ‘Oh, we didn’t know that about Cuba.’ It played a very positive role.

“I want to thank the trade unions too for showing us such support – Unison, Unite, RMT, the National Union of Teachers and others.”

As George Galloway later tells the Cuba rally following the AGM, it feels odd to be thanked by a man whose sacrifice puts most of us to shame.

The Cuban revolution remains a beacon to socialists and opponents of imperialism everywhere, a living example that another world is possible. Gonzalez and the rest of the Five paid a terrible price for their work to protect their people and their revolution. It’s we who should be thanking them.

Fernando Gonzalez addresses the Solidarity with Cuba and Venezuela: No to Trump fringe meeting at Unison conference on Tuesday. Meet in Auditorium 2, Brighton Centre at 5.15pm.

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