

# Trump admin persecutes Code Pink for bringing aid to Cuba

Code Pink co-founder Medea Benjamin joins The Grayzone's Max Blumenthal and Aaron Mate to discuss the Trump administration's politicized harassment of her organization for participating in an aid convoy to Cuba, which is suffering a humanitarian crisis under US siege. Medea offers her analysis of the potential for a US military invasion of Cuba, and the country's ability to resist. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

## #Max

This guest is being targeted by the Trump administration for bringing aid to Cuba, for trying to save lives, and really for telling the truth on Capitol Hill about the Gaza genocide, about what the war machine is doing. This is a disgustingly cynical and sloppy political prosecution of one of the most courageous Americans, who's also a brilliant analyst, and we want to get her take on the Cuba situation. Medea Benjamin from Code Pink, welcome to The Grayzone.

## #Medea Benjamin

Hey, great to be on with two of my favorite guys.

## #Max

All right. It's an honor. Yeah, I know your time is short, you're busy. Tell us—the news was that you and Code Pink were subpoenaed along with podcaster Hasan Piker for violating OFAC sanctions in Cuba. Can you tell us the truth about what's actually happening there?

## #Medea Benjamin

Yeah, we heard it from Fox News. And I thought, subpoena, wow, that sounds really scary. And I was looking outside my window, going outside, peeking around, thinking, is somebody going to be there to serve me with a subpoena? And nothing came, nothing came. And then a couple of days later, Jodie Evans was looking in her spam email box for something else, and lo and behold, she found a letter from the Treasury Department. You would think that if they were really serious, they

would at least send it certified. But they sent an email, and it's not a subpoena. It's a request for information. But it still is a pain in the neck. It means we have to get lawyers. It means we have to put a lot of time and energy because they're asking like 12 different categories of questions.

You know, when did you go to the bathroom when you were in Cuba? Everything you did every hour of the day that you were there—and not just you, I guess everybody. And there were 170 people. So, I don't know, some ridiculous questions. They want to know everything that we brought to Cuba, all the transportation that we used to get there and when we were in Cuba, you know, all kinds of ridiculous things. So it's obviously an intimidation tactic, and we take it seriously, but it certainly doesn't stop us from doing the work we have to do, which is oppose what is really an unconscionable, criminal policy that is literally killing babies, which we've seen from the doubling of the infant mortality rate.

### **#Aaron Mate**

Medea, one of the main talking points against you was that you guys stayed in a hotel that was supposedly off-limits to Americans. I think I saw an exchange between you and Senator Rick Scott earlier, where he tried to bring this up with you. Can you clear that one up?

### **#Medea Benjamin**

Yeah, that's so crazy because, you know, when we were planning the trip, we didn't want to abide by these U.S. regulations because there were lovely hotels we wanted to stay in that were modest, that were inexpensive. But if you look at the U.S. government list of prohibited hotels, there's a whole slew of them, and there's only a handful that you can use. And in fact, when we realized that we might not have transportation because of the lack of gasoline, we had to pick one that was right in the middle of the city, and that's the one we picked.

It has to be one that's owned by a foreign company, and in this case, it's Spanish. Although I might say that more recently, the U.S. has put the screws on all of these foreign companies that are working in Cuba. Now it looks like even those Spanish and other foreign-owned hotels are going to have to divest themselves of their Cuban holdings. So we stayed in the U.S.-approved hotel, and now it seems like the poor Spanish are going to lose their money on that one.

### **#Max**

Because of secondary sanctions.

### **#Medea Benjamin**

Because of secondary sanctions. And you know, Max and Aaron, you know how ironic it is that Marco Rubio says, you know, we've got to have private enterprise in Cuba. Well, when we saw a lot

of private enterprise in Cuba was during the Obama years, when they started easing some of these sanctions. And the other thing is that the pressure the Trump administration is putting on Cuba right now is really harming all of these businesses, whether they're foreign businesses that were invested in Cuba. I mean, there's one company that for 32 years, a Canadian private mining company, had been mining the nickel and cobalt in Cuba, the Sherritt International Company. And now, because of these increased sanctions that just came out about a week ago, they announced that they have to be leaving. So, you know, so much for promoting foreign enterprise in Cuba.

## **#Max**

Yeah, I mean, Cuba has been open since 1989. It's just not in the way the U.S. wants, and it's the U.S. that's seeking to close it off. And I think, you know, since we got into this discussion, it seems like the U.S. strategy is to only allow an opening within this private sector, which starts with these kind of SMEs, and now Marco Rubio is trying to ram down a so-called aid that can only be distributed by faith-based NGOs and pumped into the private sector. Isn't that kind of the strategy here, to sort of overwhelm Cuba with privatization?

## **#Medea Benjamin**

Yes, but even then, the strategy is hurting the private sector. It's really impossible. If you're an owner of a business and your child gets sick and you have to go to the hospital, these are government-owned hospitals and they don't have medicine. So you can't be promoting the private sector while you are draining Cuba of electricity, of fuel, of pumped water because the water is not getting where it's going, the elevators are not working, you know? Nothing is working when you have this kind of medieval siege, and that includes private businesses.

## **#Aaron Mate**

Medea, you've been going to Cuba for a very long time. How does what you most recently saw compare to what you know about Cuba from the past?

## **#Medea Benjamin**

I've never seen anything like this. We've been going to Cuba a lot in the last two years, and every time we go, it gets worse and worse. People are more and more miserable. They really don't know where this is leading, and there's a sense of despair and hopelessness, which is precisely what the policy is aimed at doing. So my heart goes out to the Cuban people as it gets hotter in the summer and it gets very unbearably hot. Forget about air conditioning. They don't even have fans anymore. I have friends who say that their kids are having a hard time sleeping at night. And again, this is policy. It's so that Cubans will come out on the street, and they're sweating, and they're hot, and they haven't slept, and they're angry.

And they're saying this has to end. And the only way they can see it ending is some kind of U.S. invasion, some kind of takeover. Not that that's what a lot of the people I talk to want. They just want to see some easing. They want to see a let-up. They want to see Cuba be left alone. And this naval blockade, you know, there was a Russian—the only tanker that has reached Cuba in the last few months has been one Russian tanker. But that was used up in two weeks. There was another tanker that was on its way, and it suddenly turned around. So even that hope for Cuba has been dashed. There are other countries that are helping. The Chinese are helping, sending rice.

They're also helping with solar panels. There are some shipments coming in from Mexico, from Spain, and all of our solidarity groups keep sending materials down. But it's a drop in the bucket. What Cuba needs is to be able to import oil. They need to be part of the international financial system so they can trade like anyone else. They need to lift the sanctions. And those sanctions are unfortunately codified. And that happened after the shooting down of the Brothers to the Rescue plane that they have just indicted Raúl Castro for. After that, Congress came in and codified the sanctions. So it's going to be a long slog to get these lifted. But that's what the Cubans need right now.

## **#Max**

How serious do you think the threats of an invasion are? Politico has a piece up — “The U.S. Pentagon puts building blocks in place for Cuba invasion.” The Navy's presence in the Caribbean has not reduced despite the Iran war. I think this is happening because of the Iran war, because of the failure of Trump to win in Iran, to score any military victory, to achieve any objective. Actually, it was a massive defeat, and he needs a quick win. Do you think it's possible that the U.S. will stage some sort of kinetic action against Cuba along the lines of Venezuela, or even more aggressive?

## **#Medea Benjamin**

I think there are people in the administration who understand that this would not be a quick win, that there are too many people, after all these years, who still support the Cuban government. Of course, there are a lot of people who don't, but there are still a lot of people who do. And there's no Delcy Rodríguez to just put into power by taking out one person. This is a government that has a lot of layers to it. And it might be that there are—I mean, certainly there are—plans in place for an invasion.

I heard that Trump said he didn't want troops on the ground for more than 48 hours. But I've also heard that they really want the slow bleed, that they want to wait this out, that they know the summer is going to be very difficult. And they're thinking that, you know, this could fall by itself if they just play their cards right. They say they have even more possible sanctions. It's hard to even think of what else they could possibly sanction because they've sanctioned so much. Yeah. But, you know, I think that there might be some preference to just waiting this out.

## **#Max**

Yeah, and allowing many people to possibly die excess deaths. I was visiting with a friend, a mutual friend, who went on a solidarity mission to deliver aid and said that while he was out in the countryside, he got an abscess in his tooth or in his gums and went in for an operation. Of course, you get first-rate medical care in Cuba, but there's no anesthetic. So he did the operation without anesthetic and suffered the most intense pain he'd ever experienced. And that's what the average Cuban is going through right now.

## **#Medea Benjamin**

Yeah, it's not a question, Max, of whether people will die. They are dying because of this. I mean, I mentioned the doubling of the infant mortality rate. You know, Cuba was a country that had a lower infant mortality rate than the U.S., than Western rich countries. And yet the fact that that is doubling now is because of these sanctions. And I know people who can't get their cancer medicines, who can't get the diabetes treatment they need. There are supposedly 60,000 people who can't get operations right now, and many of them are children. So the sanctions are not an alternative to war. They are a kind of warfare, and they are killing people right now.

And people should be so upset about this policy. They should be speaking out, pushing their members of Congress to vote for the War Powers resolutions that are coming up in both the House and the Senate — one coming up this week, the other one probably next week. So we need to speak out and say this is unconscionable. We don't want to keep killing babies. And we don't want groups like ours, who took primarily medicines and medical equipment to the pediatric hospitals, to be harassed, intimidated, and possibly sanctioned with very severe sanctions because we are trying to save lives.

## **#Max**

And last question, unless Aaron wants to ask or add anything, which is, why do you think—what's the real reason that the Trump administration is targeting Code Pink, Hasan Piker, and others that it plans to target with these kinds of demands for information and borderline subpoenas? My theory is Cuba was a convenient opening for them, but it's really about Israel.

## **#Medea Benjamin**

You know, I think it's about Cuba because these Cuban Americans in Miami have been pushing this for decades. And yes, some of them have connections to Israel, and many of them are sympathetic toward Israel and take money from AIPAC. But really, they have their own issue, which is people like Maria Elvira Salazar, like Carlos Gimenez, like Díaz-Balart, and, of course, Marco Rubio — their entire

careers, especially the members of Congress, have been built around trying to overthrow the government in Cuba. And they've been going after us constantly and pushing the Treasury Department.

They've been pushing the different areas of government, the State Department, to be investigating us constantly. So I think that, you know, if you look at how obsessed these people are, they have a strong lobby, and there is another connection to Israel, which is they learned from the AIPAC lobby. They're a smaller group of people, they don't have as much money, but they are well organized. And because the opposition, like us, are not paid for by the Chinese Communist Party, contrary to allegations, the groups supporting Cuba's right to sovereignty do not have a lot of money and are not well organized.

Then they hold the sway. The other thing to recognize is that it's our tax dollars, millions of them, year after year after year, that have been going to these groups in Miami to do everything from broadcasting Radio and TV Martí that are blocked from getting into Cuba, but the money has kept going year after year, to actually going around the world and trying to find disgruntled Cuban doctors working overseas who would tell how bad the Cuban government is. So that is another connection — just like we give a lot of money to Israel, we give a lot of money to these Cuba groups in Miami.

**#Max**

Indeed. One of the reasons I think they started getting this slush fund was after the Bay of Pigs, there was a fear of blowback that they would actually carry out terrorist attacks inside the U.S. unless they were given something to do and focused back on Cuba. Very extreme element, dangerous element.

**#Medea Benjamin**

And carried out extremist and violent acts in Cuba from the Bay of Pigs on. In fact, José Basulto from Brothers to the Rescue was part of the Bay of Pigs and involved in violent activities ever since. And I remember being in Cuba when they blew up a hotel and killed an Italian tourist.

**#Max**

They placed a bomb in the trash can in the hotel, right? In the lobby.

**#Medea Benjamin**

And of course, there's the airliner that they blew up.

**#Max**

Cubana Flight 455.

## **#Medea Benjamin**

Exactly. Killing 73 people, including the entire Cuban fencing team. And the people responsible for that lived their lives out very comfortably in Miami. Posada Carriles, one of them. We once did an action where it was part of the war on terror, and we said there's a terrorist living in Miami. We went to the FBI office in Miami and we said, you know, you got to do something, there's a terrorist living here. We gave the address. Of course, the FBI didn't do anything. So we went to his house, and we also then did a protest outside of Versailles, the restaurant where the right-wing Cuban Americans congregate.

And we did get attacked. And we have been complaining for years about these terrorists living in Miami. But, of course, they are our terrorists—quote, our terrorists—meaning the U.S. government's terrorists. In fact, José Basulto even said he was trained as a terrorist in the United States. And in those overflights he was doing over Cuba, he said, quote, "We want confrontation." The U.S. government people said one of these days the Cubans are going to shoot those planes down. And, of course, that happened.

## **#Max**

Yep. A warning was given to the FAA right before it took place, and a month before by the Clinton administration's top Cuba hand. Luis Posada Carriles died in his home, in his bed in Miami. His partner in crime who bombed the Cuban airliner Flight 455, Orlando Bosch, was honored in Miami with Orlando Bosch Day. So as you said, there are terrorists. You're our freedom fighter, and you're being targeted for the righteous work you're doing to save lives and to intervene against the war machine. So we... thank you for joining us at The Grayzone, and I hope, you know, I just want to make sure everyone's aware of this so they can support you. How can people best support Code Pink as you're being targeted by the Trump mafia and the Gusano industrial complex of Miami?

## **#Medea Benjamin**

Keep donating to our Humanitarian Aid for Cuba site, which is on our website. Keep joining us on trips to Cuba, which we will keep doing. We think it's very important that people keep going. We just had a group that came back a couple of days ago, and people came back and said, "These are the nicest people I ever met in my life. Why are we doing this to them?" So keep up the work. And also, as I said, please call your members of Congress and tell them to vote for the War Powers Resolution to stop an invasion and the naval blockade that is happening right now.

## **#Max**

All right. Well, Medea Benjamin from Code Pink, thanks so much for joining us.

## **#Medea Benjamin**

Thank you. Great to be on with you. Bye bye.