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Culture – Opinion – Politics – Cinema – Books – People ... Everything Off the Page

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Index

- Editorial: The human face of the blockade** – Daily suffering in Cuba beyond geopolitics. (4 pages)
- Opinion: The great scam of the new order:** Milei, Kast, Trump, and the factory of institutional fascism. By Vicente de la Serna. (5 pages)
- Analysis: The Bukele system, the Monroe Doctrine,** and the new face of authoritarianism in Latin America. (4 pages)
- History: 1492: The destruction that was baptized as "discovery."**
By Sergio Rivera (4 pages)
- Literary criticism:** Novel: *A Te Deum for Death. Volume II: The City of the Dead.* Literary criticism by Jack Solo. (5 pages)
- New authors – New books:** Novel: **Néstor Giménez: The Shadow of Time:** a novel about the love that dares not speak its name. /SE. (3 pages)
- New and Old Voices:** Poetry: **Alfonsina Storni and The Restlessness of the Rosebush:** the inaugural cry of a modern poet. (3 pages)
- People: Fifty years of words: The "El Butacón"** literary gathering celebrates half a century in Hamburg. (3 pages)
- Latin American Art: Lucot. Color as a weapon of memory.** Luis Contreras and the relevance of Latin American political art in northern Chile. By De Sauda. (6 pages)
- Latin American Cinema: "Red Ink": The jewel of Peruvian cinema** that you can watch for free on YouTube and that will make you re-evaluate journalism. (4 pages).
- Latin America Today: The Cerimedo-Negre Network:** The New Face of Technofascism in Latin America? (4 pages).
- International: Von der Leyen's "robust" narrative and the absence of self-criticism.**
2nd Editorial. (5 pages)
- Other books, other authors:** José Vargas. *Los {F}* – *The Invisibles* by Brian Flores (1 page)
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Off the Page

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EDITORIAL

The Human Face of the Blockade:

Daily Suffering in Cuba Beyond Geopolitics

In a hospital in Havana, a premature baby named Alejandro, weighing barely two pounds, fights for survival inside an incubator. It is one of the few still working at the Eusebio Hernández Pérez maternity ward, because power surges — increasingly frequent due to blackouts — have damaged the delicate electronic components of the others. And due to sanctions, importing spare parts is nearly impossible.

This image, recently documented by members of the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, sums up what the U.S. blockade means in practice for everyday Cubans: a daily struggle to access the most basic necessities.

Far from the geopolitical debate and the official statements of both governments, there is a tangible reality of an exhausted population. This article seeks to answer a simple question: What have the people experienced? And although the Cuban regime bears its share of responsibility for the crisis, recent data and testimonies indicate that the economic strangulation imposed from outside has reached levels of "energy famine" with devastating humanitarian consequences.

The "Energy Famine": When Fuel Is a Matter of Life and Death

On January 29, 2026, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that not only reinforced the historic blockade but added an unprecedented layer of pressure: the imposition of tariffs on any country that supplied oil to Cuba. For an island that produces barely 40% of the crude oil it needs and whose electrical infrastructure dates back to the Cold War, this measure was the equivalent of cutting off the oxygen supply.



Independent experts from the UN Human Rights Council described the situation as an "energy famine." In March 2026, before a Russian shipment arrived that barely covered ten days of demand, Cuba ran out of diesel and fuel oil reserves. This is not merely a logistical data point; it is the difference between an operating room being lit or plunged into darkness.

The Cuban healthcare system, once a source of national pride, is the clearest reflection of this collapse. According to the Ministry of Public Health and UN reports, the surgical backlog exceeds 96,000 pending operations, including 11,000 pediatric surgeries. In oncology, the situation is critical: only one of the country's six linear accelerators for cancer treatment is functioning, while more than 3,000 patients are waiting for chemotherapy due to drug shortages.

Hard Facts: The Statistics That Speak of Pain

To understand the magnitude, it is useful to look at the numbers published by international organizations and by the Cuban government itself in its annual reports to the UN, though it must always be kept in mind that official figures on the island are opaque and sometimes questionable.

Nevertheless, the trends are undeniable and have been recorded by independent sources:

Infant and Maternal Mortality: Between 2018 and 2025, the infant mortality rate — which was exceptionally low — soared by 148%. In February 2026, it was reported that 32,880 pregnant women faced additional risks because the lack of gasoline prevented obstetric ultrasounds or emergency mobilizations of medical teams.

Malnutrition and Water: Without electricity to pump water, more than one million people depend on tanker trucks ("pipas") to obtain drinking water. Food security has deteriorated because there is no fuel to transport food from farming areas to the cities.

Brain Drain: Perhaps the most revealing indicator of discontent and exhaustion is the diaspora. Between 2020 and 2024, approximately 2.5 million people (24% of the population) left the island. Independent demographers believe the current population could even be below 8 million inhabitants.

The Opportunity Cost: What Could Have Been Done Without the Blockade?

The Cuban government calculates that between March 2024 and February 2025, the blockade caused losses of more than \$7.556 billion — a 49% increase from the previous year due to the tightening of measures.

To put this in domestic perspective, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez presented a series of staggering equivalences:

- 16 days of blockade equal the cost of the basic package of medicines for the entire country (\$339 million).
- 14 hours of blockade equal the cost of insulin for all diabetics in the country.
- 19 minutes of blockade equal the cost of the wheelchairs needed for special education schools.

These calculations, although coming from an official source, illustrate a key economic concept: opportunity cost. Even if one is skeptical about the exact figures, the reality is that entire hospitals lack reagents for blood banks, household appliances have gone unrepaired for years, and public buses are not running.

Where Does the Cuban Government's Responsibility Lie?

It would be a mistake to analyze this crisis without pointing out the structural dysfunctions of the Cuban system. The situation is not solely the fault of the blockade. One could draw a parallel with the Soviet Union and decades of excessive centralism, which led to a lack of competitiveness. The lack of incentives for productivity is also a factor to consider, as is a dual currency system that scares away foreign investment. The militarization of the economy (through the Business Administration Group, GAESA) has, according to studies, also contributed to worsening the shortages.

The Cuban government's inability to implement deep economic reforms during periods of relative détente (such as during the Obama administration) has also brought the country to the brink of its current abyss.

(Foto: Bernhard_Staerck)



However, acknowledging these internal shortcomings does not contradict the fact that the U.S. blockade is the primary cause of the current suffocation. Even a perfectly managed regime could not operate an electrical grid without fuel, nor manufacture medicines if it is prevented from buying raw materials, nor treat cancer if the parent companies of medical technology (all American or with U.S. patents) are prohibited from selling spare parts due to the "10% U.S. content" rule.

Beyond Coercion: The New McCarthyism and Imperial Arrogance

"Economic coercion" is a cold euphemism for what is happening. It is not just about economic strangulation; it is part of a deliberate strategy that some officials in the Trump administration have described as "accelerationism": a phased plan to collapse Cuban society, with the explicit goal of forcing regime change. Reports from sources such as Axios and The New York Times have revealed that the White House seeks to "exhaust all levers" to provoke social unrest, while avoiding a direct military invasion that could prove unpopular. This strategy, which includes threats of direct military action and the positioning of warships, is a display of the arrogance of an empire that assumes dominion over everything around it solely because of its military might.

This new "Left-Wing Anti-Terrorism Shield" program creates a framework where everything fits: from criticism of U.S. foreign policy to the defense of human rights, all is labeled as a threat to national security.

This arrogance is also manifested in the revival of a new McCarthyism. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel has strongly denounced the resurgence of a "new and more dangerous version of McCarthyism" by the Trump administration. In July 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio convened an international summit to launch his crusade against "political terrorism of the radical left." As part of this offensive, the State Department published a report titled "Cuba: Capital of 21st Century Communism," which accuses the island of leading a campaign against the United States and, without evidence, points to activists, journalists, and U.S. organizations as "fellow travelers" or front groups serving Havana. This report has served as a basis for harassing progressive organizations such as The People's Forum, which has received judicial subpoenas to hand over its internal communications — a clear attempt to silence dissenting voices.

This new "Left-Wing Anti-Terrorism Shield" program creates a framework where everything fits: from criticism of U.S. foreign policy to the defense of human rights, all is labeled as a threat to national security. UN experts have already pointed out that the characterization of Cuba as a threat to U.S. security "lacks credibility" and appears designed solely to justify the use of extraordinary coercive powers. In this context, Cuba has labeled the blockade as an "act of genocide" and a "crime against humanity" in full execution — a claim that, while highly charged politically, finds an echo in the UN experts' description of the energy blockade as "collective punishment" against the civilian population.

A Calculated Cruelty

At the Havana maternity ward, women in labor climb stairs in the dark because elevators do not work. In pediatric hospitals, doctors manually pump respirators to keep babies alive during blackouts. This is the reality of the blockade: a collective punishment that has transcended the category of political sanction to become a tool of regime change.

Cuba needs change, perhaps profound change. We can discuss economic and political freedom, but not with an American gun pointed at our heads. The blockade affects not only American companies but every company that does business with Cuba. The criminal arrogance of an empire that does as it pleases by force and now dusts off McCarthyite tactics to persecute its own citizens is not the best foundation for solving the underlying problem.

Today more than ever, Cuba needs to be allowed to breathe. As long as the blockade persists with this intensity, the suffering of Alejandro, the premature baby, and that of the 96,000 patients on the waiting list, will be the only statistic that truly matters.

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Néstor Gimenez

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"El amor eterno no es el que perdura en el tiempo,
sino el que, contra todo pronóstico, vuelve a encenderse."