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Cubans on a quest for justice

Bruno Rodriguez Parilla, Cuba's Foreign Minister, is the quintessential diplomat, pleading his country's case without riling enemy and ally alike.

By **PAUL GABRIEL**
paulnews@thestar.com.my

WHETHER denouncing the decades-long United States economic blockade against Cuba; calling for reform of the United Nations; rejecting the global economic order, the existence of a "privileged club", double standards and political manipulation; or highlighting the threat of a nuclear war, Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parilla, 52, communicates without fury of language.

"I have lived my whole life under the blockade. My son is 10 years old and was born and lives under the blockade. Three generations of Cubans have suffered from the consequences of a failed policy," he relates in a calm and calculated tone.

The Caribbean island has endured crippling US sanctions for 50 years and the demand to end the blockade is at the centre of the current session of the UN General Assembly.

On Oct 26, for the 19th year running, the UN will vote on a new resolution calling for an end to the blockade by a series of US administrations. Malaysia is set to join the overwhelming chorus of support for Cuba again.

In an exclusive interview with *Sunday Star* during a brief visit to Kuala Lumpur earlier this week, Rodriguez speaks about Cuba's Castro brothers – former president Fidel and incumbent Raul – the situation in Cuba, his country's relations with the world, and his people's quest for justice.

Q: Is Fidel Castro in much better health, as reports from Cuba and selected TV footage seem to suggest?

A: Fidel is very much active now. He has had an excellent recovery, and he has a tremendous political and ethical leadership which surpasses the boundaries of Cuba. Of late, he has been participating in mass rallies, delivering speeches and writing all the time.

In fact, I am reading his most recent article (at this juncture, Rodriguez shows the article on his

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blackberry). It's about the book recently published by (Bob) Woodward, *Obama's Wars*. Our people are rejoicing because of the new presence of Fidel among us.

> Is it true then that the former president is not totally removed from Cuba's political life?

President Raul is entrusted with full powers in all faculties; he is in charge of the Government. Fidel is the leader of the Cuban Revolution and there isn't any interference, much less any difference, between the two. Raul is in charge of all government tasks. He is now devoted to resolving the country's problems, which are mostly on the economy.

> How do you see Cuba under President Raul?

There is a profound continuity with Raul. It is about the same process. There could be some differences when it comes to personal style but there is no difference whatsoever in terms of thinking or vision for the future of the country. In each and every stage, they are doing the things that are pertinent to that specific period. Fidel did so for many years and now this is what

Raul is doing. I would say this is about a profound continuity. At the same time, there is an updating process particularly on the economy, given the difficult economic environment caused by the US economic blockade and the global economic crisis as well as the impact of climate change on the Cuban economy.

> How are your people coping with the hardship caused by the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the US against Cuba for more than five decades now?

All Cuban families are suffering from the consequences of the blockade. I have lived my whole life under the blockade. My son is 10 years old and was born and lives under the blockade.

Three generations of Cubans have suffered from the consequences of a failed policy which is a remnant of the Cold War and contrary to US national interest and that of the American people. At the same time, it is a gross violation of human rights and, according to the Geneva Convention, qualifies as an act of genocide.

In Cuba, no one has died as a result of the blockade, thanks to the grand efforts of the Government

and Cuban society as a whole. But the blockade has caused human damage and there are very tragic examples of that.

We are forced to perform open-heart paediatrics surgery because we are not allowed to buy equipment necessary for non-invasive

techniques.

In Cuba, we are not allowed access to the best paediatric anaesthetics. Children suffering from cancer are not able to take drugs that palliate the effects of radiotherapy and chemotherapy because all these medications are protected by American patents.

And so is the case with the economy and life in general. This is the main obstacle to the economic development of Cuba. The overwhelming majority of the population understand this and know that the only way forward is through resistance and dedicated labour. We feel optimistic because we know that the blockade policy has failed and that at some point in time it will be lifted.

> Cuba has been battling on the diplomatic stage about gross injustices against its people. After decades, are you still committed to the diplomatic route?

Yes. The main resistance is being carried out by each and every Cuban family based on their understanding of the causes of the economic problems and their willingness to cope for many years with these effects.

People understand that there are problems caused by the inefficient management of the economy in some areas or due to the international economic order which is so excluding and unjust. The people are very well informed about the way the US economic blockade is implemented against Cuba.

Under the Obama Administration, the blockade continues to be fully implemented. The damages caused by the blockade all these years amount to about US\$751bil. There is the attempt to impose complete international isolation on Cuba. (Last year), 187 countries voted at the UN in favour of lifting the blockade.

> The UN will vote again later this month on a new resolution calling for an end to the blockade. But UN resolutions since 1991 have failed to lift the embargo.

It is a long historical process. I

remember other topics which have been discussed at the UN for decades before being resolved. I am quite sure that on Oct 26 there will be an overwhelming response by the international community against the blockade and in favour of Cuba.

> You said last month that President Obama has fallen short of expectations on his dealings with Cuba. What should the president do for you to change that assessment?

President Obama can lead a historic change on the policy towards Cuba. He can find support in Congress as well as in American society. The data and everything else is indicative that this issue can be resolved. Through executive orders, he could introduce significant changes in the implementation of the blockade policy. He has all constitutional powers and authority to do that. But President Obama is losing an opportunity.

> In your view, what would the Cuban nation be like today if it hadn't been for the blockade?

From the political and ethical point of view, Cuba would be the same country it is now. But without the blockade, Cuba would be a much richer nation with a far more developed economy and higher living standard.

However, despite the blockade, Cuba is among the countries with the highest social standards in the world with recognised successes in terms of social inclusion, equal opportunities, access to public health, education and knowledge, culture and sports.

> Cuba has formal relations with 183 nations and you are friendly with China and Russia. Can you tell us about your growing relationship with the world?

We have broad relations with countries in every region. Cuba is fully inserted in the Latin American-Caribbean environment. We have the unanimous support of all these countries against the US policy towards Cuba.

We have had historical relations with Africa and Asia. Cuba has profound relations with Europe, and Australia and Canada. Tourism is very important in the economic life of Cuba. We have an open economy and export of medical services is one of our main sources of income.

Cuba is a major issuing country of international co-operation. We have

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more than 50,000 Cubans working in other countries, and there are over 30,000 foreign students in Cuba. And we do have a profound relationship with the American people.

The Cuban people make a clear distinction between their relations with the US Government and with the American people, with whom we have a strong cultural bond. So I can say that Cuba has a very broad relationship with the world.

> In your speech last month at the UN General Assembly, you spoke of the risk of a nuclear war. You have just visited Teheran. Do you believe that Iran has any intention of developing nuclear weapons?

That is a hypothetical question but I can assure you that Cuba supports the right of every country to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes including the full cycle of nuclear fuels.

At the same time, Cuba calls for a complete disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament. The only thing that can make this planet a safer place would be the total eradication of all nuclear weapons. There is a lot of political manipulation on this issue, unfortunately.

> Cuba continues to be listed as a state sponsor of terrorism by the US. Do you possess weapons of mass destruction? Do you offer safe haven to terrorists and does Cuba oppose the war on terror?

The US resorts to double standards when it comes to international terrorism, which is very unfortunate because terrorism is a scourge. Never has the Cuban territory been used to launch any terrorist attack against the US.

Historically, Cuba has been a victim of terrorism, particularly state terrorism originating in the US. The terrorism against Cuba has been historically protected within the US territory. Three thousand four hundred and seventy-eight Cubans have died and 2,099 have been maimed as a result of terrorist attacks.

Several days ago, we marked the 34th anniversary of a Cuban airliner that exploded in mid-air. The masterminds of this first terrorist attack against a passenger airliner in the Western hemisphere can walk freely down the streets of Miami. One of them was pardoned by Bush Senior (former US president George

H. W. Bush). Another has been tried for secondary charges, namely on his migration status, but has not been tried as an international terrorist.

The US is the only country sending to prison anti-terrorist fighters. Five young Cubans (known as the Cuban Five) are serving unfair sentences (in the US since 1998). They went through politically motivated trials. But terrorists are freed.

President Obama has an opportunity to show that he is strongly committed to the war on terror by impeaching all these people and releasing the five Cuban anti-terrorists.

> But do you possess weapons of mass destruction, as some may believe?

None! Neither do we develop

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Rodriguez: 'I am quite sure that on Oct 26 there will be an overwhelming response by the international community against the blockade and in favour of Cuba'

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Proud of Cuba's medical technology

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them nor are we interested in having them. We believe in ideas, in the strength of truth, no one in the world could believe that Cuba poses a threat to the security of any state.

> Can Cuban scientists find a cure for dengue fever, cancer and AIDS?

Cuban medical science has been recognised as one of the most advanced in the world. Cuba produces state-of-the-art vaccines and new technologies in bio-technology and pharmaceuticals. And we have had significant advances in the development of therapeutic vaccines against cancer and against epidemic diseases.

We have also developed advanced medications for diabetic ulcers and vaccines for tropical diseases not affecting Cuba but causing a lot of harm to Africans. We have one of the lowest AIDS rates. We have a powerful health system.

> As Foreign Minister, you travel around the world seeking the support of the media as well. Do you feel the Western media has a biased agenda against Cuba?

We believe in free flow of information and we feel that the truth will finally prevail. Cuba has historically suffered from slander and manipulation but at the end of the day, the

truth has always prevailed. Cuba is a country that enjoys great prestige and the broadest international support.

We do not believe in the privately-owned media. We are alarmed by the increasing private ownership of the media around the world. We are very much alarmed when we see that the media or publicity is used to make people react like animals. I am alarmed about the frailty that the media projects about life, and the way in which public opinion is deprived from information; the way in which the big media uses information in a politically-motivated way.

I don't think the Internet is a channel for free flow of information. I lived for 10 years in the US and had very good relations with the American press.

But I later felt deeply frustrated when informed of the embedded (US) press during the Iraq war. We firmly believe in public opinion and the right of people to receive information ... accurate and objective information.

> As a top diplomat, do you also endure hardships due to the blockade? Can you purchase, say a computer, easily?

My child was born in Cuba but for the first three years, he lived in the US. He could not understand that he had no access to Google Earth, that he is not allowed to access some products and services.

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At the UN, the services were privatised and certain events to taste Cuban cigars were banned because the (US) Treasury imposed restrictions on the American companies providing the cigars.

During my decade at the UN, I had my own personal blockade, expressed through a restriction of movement limited to a 40-km radius around Columbus Circle near Central Park (in New York City). This is an absurd policy.

> ***Patria o Muerte, venceremos!***
(Homeland or death, we will triumph!) Does this famed battle cry of Fidel's still inspire your people?

It is not a battle cry, rather an expression of

a supreme willingness on the part of a people who work and love life and independence, who believe in spiritual values and profound ideas created through hundreds of years of struggle for independence, whose resistance has no limits.

So the expression that you quote is very much valid today. It is an appeal to mobilise people. This phrase was (first) expressed at a very tragic moment in our history, on the eve of an American aggression before a nuclear crisis broke out.

Cuba is one of the few countries which lived through the danger of disappearance due to a nuclear threat. That is why we so strongly defend peace today.