

Publication: The Miami Herald; Date: Dec 5, 2013; Section: Front Page; Page: 19A

ALAN GROSS

After four years, a family still waits

BY RUTH MARCUS ruthmarcus@washpost.com

The fourth Thanksgiving. The fourth Hanukkah. This is a hard season for Judy Gross, even harder for her husband, Alan, who on Tuesday began his fifth year of captivity in a Cuban prison.

Eleven more years stretch ahead on the sentence for Gross, who spends 23 hours a day in his cell. Gross, now 64, was convicted of “acts against the . . . territorial integrity of the state” — bringing cellphones, personal computers and networking devices to help connect Cuba’s tiny Jewish population to the Internet.

All this — and here is the part that is both tragic and galling — not as some kind of cowboy do-gooder but as a contractor for the State Department’s U.S. Agency for International Development, which runs programs to promote democracy in Cuba.

“It brings up thoughts of how many more years,” Judy Gross told me. “Are we going to be doing this again on the fifth anniversary or on the sixth?”

The Obama administration says it has been doing its utmost to secure Gross’ release, enlisting everyone from the pope to Latin American leaders. The Gross family begs to differ. In a letter to President Obama released Tuesday, Alan Gross outlined his ordeal and described his sense of being “abandoned” by the government he served.

“I have lost almost everything in the last four years, most of all time with my family,” Gross wrote. “I have had to ask my daughters not to visit because I cannot bear them seeing me like this, a shadow of my former self, surrounded by men with machine guns.”

During his imprisonment, Gross’ older daughter battled breast cancer, then walked down the aisle for her wedding without her father.

“I still want to believe that my government values my life and my service, and that a U.S. passport means something,” Gross wrote. “I refuse to accept that my country would leave me behind.”

Buttressing Gross’ plea, 66 senators, led by Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy, wrote to Obama last month to urge that he take “whatever steps are in the national interest to obtain his release.”

The national interest — that deliberately obscure phrase. Gross is, first and foremost, a victim of the repressive Cuban regime. But he is also a casualty of Cuban-American politics, and Cuban-American politicians. He has not been so much abandoned by the Obama administration as assigned a lower priority.

The administration has been demanding Gross’ unconditional release, which would be nice but is not happening.

Instead, Cuban officials have made clear that their price for a deal centers on a group called the Cuban Five — Cuban intelligence officers convicted in Miami in 2001 of being foreign agents and related offenses. One of the five has served his sentence and returned to Cuba; another is eligible for parole in February.

The Obama administration has insisted that the Cuban Five cannot be part of any Gross-related deal; such a linkage, the administration argues, would create a false equivalence between the five (acknowledged spies, although Cuba insists their activities were directed at Cuban exiles) and Gross (a contractor, not a spy, although that nicety might be lost on the Cuban government, given that the U.S. goal is regime change).

One problem with the no-false-equivalence stance is that it leaves Gross in the ironic position that he would have been a better candidate for a trade had he been a spy. Another is that it ignores a rich history of swaps, not all spy-for-spy.

Finally, it fails to consider the tangled history of the Cuban Five.

They are not the heroes of Cuban lore; one was convicted of conspiracy to murder involving Cuba’s shooting down of two Brothers to the Rescue planes, resulting in four deaths.

But the circumstances of their trial in the heated atmosphere of post-Elián González Miami were questionable — an appeals court, later overturned, vacated their convictions on the ground they could not receive a fair trial — and their sentences were uncommonly long. If Israel can release murderers to obtain the return of its citizens, can't the U.S. government discuss leniency for some of the remaining five?

The State Department, I am reliably told, supports such talks. The White House has balked. The most obvious explanation is that it would infuriate powerful Cuban-American lawmakers, most prominently New Jersey Democrat Robert Menendez, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is adamantly opposed to any such negotiations.

Like I said, Gross hasn't been abandoned, just prioritized. Not much comfort for his family, or for him.

(c) 2013, Washington

Post

Writers Group



CHARLES DHARAPAK/AP

Judy Gross, wife of Alan Gross, at a Washington, D.C., event to mark the beginning of his fifth year in a Cuban prison.



MARCUS