Before his sudden, shocking, five-year-long imprisonment by Castro’s Cuba, Alan Gross spent more than 25 years traveling the globe to administer civilian foreign aid and promote democracy on behalf of private industry, non-government organizations, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Gross fought poverty and oppression in more than 50 countries in the Middle East, Europe, Asia and Africa.

In 2009, Gross was abruptly arrested by Cuban officials, who falsely accused him of working for American intelligence services. He was in fact working on a humanitarian project to improve wireless access for small communities across Cuba, with a special emphasis on helping Cuba’s small Jewish community. In March 2011, Gross was wrongfully convicted for “acts against the territorial integrity of the state,” and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

During his captivity in Cuba, Gross spent 23 hours a day confined to a small jail cell, almost completely isolated from the outside world. His physical health and emotional well-being deteriorated over five long years, as his hopes that he would ever return home alive were challenged.

Gross’s wife, Judy—along with Jewish, Christian and Moslem humanitarian groups worldwide—fought tirelessly for Gross’s freedom. After being unjustly imprisoned for 1,841 days, the Cuban government released Alan Gross on humanitarian grounds on December 17, 2014.