

URGENT ACTION

WOMEN DENIED RIGHT TO PROTEST

A group of female relatives of prisoners of conscience in Cuba and their supporters were again prevented from organizing a peaceful protest on 28 August. They have been harassed and intimidated by state officials since mid-July for their peaceful activities.

The Ladies in White (*Damas de Blanco*), a group of female relatives of former prisoners of conscience and current political prisoners, and the Ladies in Support (*Damas de Apoyo*), have since mid-July faced arbitrary arrest and physical assault from members of the security forces and government supporters in the south-eastern city of Santiago de Cuba and surrounding towns.

On 28 August, 13 *Damas* gathered at the home of Aimée Garcés Leyva with the plan to go to the cathedral of Santiago de Cuba in order to attend mass, and afterward organize a peaceful protest around the cathedral. However, according to testimonies from some of the women, the house was surrounded early in the morning by police cars and female police officers. Testimonies say the *Damas* were ill-treated by the officers and forced into buses. As on previous Sundays, they were driven near to their hometowns in the province of Santiago de Cuba and released. The *Damas* also claims that police officers took computers, cell phones, photo cameras, memory flash drives, book notes and other external hard drives from the home of Aimée Garcés Leyva.

Two other *Damas* who were driving from Holguín to Santiago de Cuba on 27 August, complained to have been violently arrested in the municipality of Bayamo. They were brought back to Holguín where they spent a night in jail.

The *Damas* are planning to try to organize a silent protest on 4 September, and every subsequent Sunday, to call for the release of prisoners they believe to have been jailed for their dissident activities.

Please write immediately in Spanish or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to permit the Ladies in White and Ladies in Support to march peacefully on Sundays and attend religious services without unreasonable restrictions;
- urging them to cease immediately the harassment and intimidation of the Ladies in White, Ladies in Support and any other citizens who seek to exercise peacefully their rights to freedom of expression and association.
- asking them to thoroughly and independently investigate the accusations of ill-treatment by police officers on the Ladies in White and Ladies in Support and bring those responsible to justice respecting international standards.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 13 OCTOBER 2011 TO:

Head of State and Government

Raúl Castro Ruz
 Presidente
 La Habana, Cuba
 Fax: +53 7 8333085 (via Foreign
 Ministry); +1 2127791697 (via Cuban
 Mission to UN)
 Email: cuba@un.int (c/o Cuban Mission
 to UN)

**Salutation: Su Excelencia/
 Your Excellency**

Interior Minister

General Abelardo Coloma Ibarra
 Ministro del Interior y Prisiones
 Ministerio del Interior, Plaza de la
 Revolución, La Habana, Cuba
 Fax: +537 8556621, +1 2127791697 (via
 Cuban Mission to UN)
 Email: correominint@mn.mn.co.cu

**Salutation: Su Excelencia/
 Your Excellency**

And copies to

First Secretary, Cuban Communist Party
 of Santiago de Cuba
 Lázaro Espósito
 Primer Secretario del Partido Comunista
 de Santiago de Cuba
 Avenida Garzón 51
 Plaza de Martes
 Santiago de Cuba
 Provincia de Santiago de Cuba
 Cuba

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 256/11. Further information:

<http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR25/003/2011/en>

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 INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In 2003, over several days, the Cuban authorities arrested 75 men and women for their peaceful expression of critical opinions of the government. They were subjected to summary trials and were sentenced to prison terms of up to 28 years. Amnesty International declared the 75 convicted dissidents to be prisoners of conscience, and the last of them was released in April 2011.

The *Damas de Blanco* organizes peaceful marches where they distribute flowers and call for the release of their relatives and friends. In 2005, the *Damas de Blanco* were awarded The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament.

The *Damas de Apoyo* emerged as a solidarity group who support and participate in activities organized by the *Damas de Blanco*.

There are now 35 *Damas de Blanco* and *Apoyo* from the eastern provinces of Santiago de Cuba, Holguín, Las Tunas, Granma and Guantánamo.

The *Damas de Blanco* and *Damas de Apoyo* have repeatedly suffered harassment and intimidation during their peaceful activities. In central Havana on 18 August 2011, 49 *Damas* were prevented from carrying out a protest in support of their members in Santiago de Cuba and other eastern provinces. Government supporters physically forced them to return to their homes. On 14 August only three of 22 *Damas* who travelled to Santiago de Cuba managed to enter the Cathedral for mass. Five of them were arrested before mass began, and taken to various police stations in the city and held for several hours. The 14 other *Damas* were stopped at a police checkpoint 11 km outside the city and forced off the bus they were travelling in by women police officers. Nine of them, including Belkis Cantillo Ramírez, the wife of former prisoner of conscience José Daniel Ferrer García, were kicked and slapped as they were pushed into police cars and returned to their homes.

On 21 August, 11 *Damas* gathered at the home of Aimée Garcés Leyva in the town of Palma Soriano. Some 100 people, including police and government supporters, surrounded the house for several hours. When the women tried to leave, police pushed them and pulled their hair before forcing them into buses. They were driven a few kilometres, then taken in police cars and dropped near their hometowns in the provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Holguín.

Name: Damas de Blanco and Damas de Apoyo

Gender m/f: f

Further information on UA: 256/11 Index: AMR 25/004/2011 Issue Date: 1 September 2011