

AI Index: PRE 01/230/2010
08 July 2010

Cuba urged to immediately release all prisoners of conscience

Amnesty International calls on the Cuban government to immediately free all prisoners of conscience, after authorities yesterday said 52 prisoners will be released.

Five of the 52 detainees, whose names are yet to be revealed, are due to be released shortly, while the remaining prisoners will be freed within 3 to 4 months, according to the agreement announced by Church officials yesterday.

“We welcome the commitment to release these prisoners but there is no reason why all 53 prisoners of conscience held in Cuba, should not be released immediately.” said Susan Lee, Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“These men have been imprisoned since 2003 simply for peacefully expressing their political beliefs and should be released unconditionally now.”

One prisoner of conscience allegedly not included in the release plan, lawyer Rolando Jiménez Posada, is serving a 12 year prison sentence after being convicted of “disrespecting authority and revealing secrets about state security police” following his peaceful manifestation of support for political prisoners. Amnesty International is calling for his immediate release.

The Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, said the released prisoners and their families could settle in Spain, following talks he held with Cuban authorities and Roman Catholic Church officials in Havana.

It is not clear whether the men would be given the option to remain in Cuba.

“Forcing them to leave the country would be yet another attempt to suppress freedom of expression and movement in Cuba,” Susan Lee.

The 52 were detained during the “Black Spring” crackdown in March 2003, when 75 dissidents were arrested, of which 23 have already been released.

Amnesty International declared them prisoners of conscience, as they acted non-violently and were imprisoned under Cuban legislation which illegitimately criminalizes political dissent.

The deal follows protests by Guillermo Fariñas, an independent journalist who says he is nearing death after being on hunger strike for more than 4 months calling for the release of prisoners of conscience that suffer serious medical conditions. Prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo, died on 22 February this year,

after 11 weeks on hunger strike.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Cuban government to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience.

“The government must now fulfil its promise and immediately release these prisoners who should never have been jailed in the first place.”

Cuban authorities continue to deny the existence of political prisoners in the country, asserting that “nobody has ever been punished for merely expressing a difference of opinion or point of view, even when these have been contrary to those of the authorities.”

Amnesty International calls for the remaining political prisoners to be granted prompt and fair trials.

“The Cuban government must also end the harassment and intimidation of independent journalists, human rights activists and political dissidents.

”Vague and arbitrarily applied legal provisions, used to curb dissent within Cuba, must be reviewed to make human rights a reality for all Cubans”, concluded Susan Lee.