

AI Index: PRE01/417/2010
15 December 2010

Independent journalist denied permission to travel outside Cuba to receive prize

Amnesty International has criticised the Cuban authorities for not allowing an independent journalist to leave the country to collect an international freedom award.

Guillermo Fariñas, was awarded the Andrei Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament last October and, although his passport and visa are in order, Cuban authorities have failed to grant him the exit permit needed to travel outside the country.

“The Cuban government should have allowed Guillermo Fariñas to attend the ceremony in Strasbourg on 15 December, he has campaigned peacefully for human rights in Cuba and the award recognises that struggle,” said Amnesty International’s Kerrie Howard, Americas Programme deputy director.

“This restriction on his fundamental freedom of movement is an unnecessary punishment imposed for carrying out his legitimate right to freedom of expression”.

Guillermo Fariñas is an independent journalist who has been involved in a peaceful campaign for freedom of expression in Cuba. At the end of 2009 he started a hunger strike that lasted 4 months calling for the release of prisoners of conscience.

In the past, the Cuban authorities have denied exit permits to those who express critical views of the government.

In October last year, Yoani Sánchez, a blogger who was awarded a special citation for journalistic excellence by the board of the Maria Moors Cabot Prize in New York, could not attend the ceremony because the Cuban authorities refused to lift travel restrictions imposed on her.

The decision to deny Guillermo Fariñas also follows recent attempts to clamp down on human rights activities in Cuba.

The Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation reported that, between 9 and 10 December, at least a hundred human rights activists were temporarily detained in different locations across Cuba by the authorities in what they believe was an attempt to prevent them from attending several acts to commemorate Human Rights Day. They were released a few hours later.

“In recent months, the Cuban authorities have made progress in the release of prisoners of conscience and dissidents, but the travel restrictions imposed on Guillermo Fariñas and others show that there is still a long way to go to improving respect of human rights” said Amnesty International’s Kerrie Howard, Americas Programme deputy director.

Background Information

Cubans wishing to travel abroad must obtain an exit visa called a tarjeta blanca (white card). Although Raúl Castro announced in 2008 that the government would ease travel restrictions for its citizens. The situation relating to dissidents does not appear to be changing: Independent journalists, human rights defenders and political opponents have often been restricted from leaving Cuba to attend events abroad.

The Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation reported that most people who were detained in different locations across Cuba, on their way to meetings and demonstrations to celebrate Human Rights Day.