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Cuba: Heavy prison sentences -- a giant step backwards for human rights

In a move which signals a giant step backwards for human rights, at least 33 Cuban dissidents arrested in a government crackdown in March have been sentenced to terms ranging from 14 to 27 years, Amnesty International said today.

"Cuban courts have not handed down such heavy sentences, following summary trials of such a broad swathe of people, in over two decades. This is an appalling development in Cuba."

"These people, who Amnesty International fears may have been arrested for nothing more than the peaceful exercise of fundamental freedoms, have been sentenced after manifestly unfair trials conducted in haste and secrecy," the organization added.

In a particularly worrying development, prosecutors have reportedly called for the death penalty against activist José Daniel Ferrer Castillo, regional coordinator in Santiago de Cuba province for the *Movimiento Cristiano Liberación*, (Christian Liberation Movement) and the Varela Project, a petition for a referendum on fundamental freedoms. Amnesty International, which had publicly welcomed the *de facto* moratorium on executions practiced by Cuba over the last three years, considers the prosecution's alleged recourse to the death sentence against José Daniel Ferrer Castillo to be a severely regressive step.

Amnesty International has just published a document, *Cuba: Massive crackdown on dissent*, on the wave of arrests of at least 77 political dissidents, independent journalists and human rights activists. All of them are apparently being subjected to unfair trials after being accused of state security and other offences.

"The Cuban government must ensure that no-one is imprisoned for the non-violent exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association," the organization said.

Amnesty International would consider anyone imprisoned for these reasons to be a prisoner of conscience.

For a copy of Amnesty International's report, *Cuba: Massive crackdown on dissent* (AMR 25/008/2003, 3 April 2003) please contact Amnesty International's press office on +44 20 7413 5566 or press@amnesty.org

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