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CUBA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF LEADERS  
OF CONCILIO CUBANO

Amnesty International is calling on the Cuban authorities to immediately release the leaders of non-governmental groups belonging to a recently-established coalition called *Concilio Cubano*, Cuban Concilium.

“We are very concerned about what appears to be a serious clampdown by the authorities on the peaceful activities of members of *Concilio Cubano*,” Amnesty International said today.

Members of the coalition have faced frequent short-term detention and harassment since it was set up in October last year. However, the past few days has seen an intensification of action against them by the authorities in what appears to be a concerted attempt to prevent them from holding a national meeting from 24-27 February.

Today, only half an hour after talking to Amnesty International by telephone, Rafael Solano, director of *Habana Press* -- an independent press agency which is also part of *Concilio Cubano* -- was arrested by state security officials and taken to the 11th police unit in San Miguel del Padrón, Havana. At the time of writing, he is still in detention.

The current clampdown began on 15 February when Dr Leonel Morejón Almagro, the national organizer of *Concilio Cubano*, and deputy national organizers, Mercedes Parada Antúñez and Lázaro González Valdés, were arrested in Havana on the orders of the Department of State Security and taken to different police stations. The latter two were detained following police searches of their homes in which documents belonging to the coalition were confiscated.

On 16 February Mercedes Parada Antúñez was transferred under police guard to the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital in Havana to undergo a minor operation but she was reportedly told that she still faces various charges.

The arrest of Dr Morejón took place at the office of the *Buró de Prensa Independiente de Cuba (BPIC)*, Independent Cuban Press Bureau, also part of the coalition, after a large police operation had closed off the area around the house for several hours. Next day a fourth member of the national organizing group of *Concilio Cubano*, Héctor Palacio Ruiz, was detained at his home, again after a police search. One report says he was released later that day although confirmation has been hard to obtain.

As of 18 February, Dr Morejón and Lázaro González Valdés were both still in detention in two different police stations and have reportedly gone on hunger strike. According to Dr Morejón's mother, who was able to visit him briefly, he was being subjected to pressure by the authorities to make him sign statements he did not agree with. Latest reports indicate that the two have been transferred to the State Security headquarters at Villa Marista.

According to reports, several other members of groups belonging to *Concilio Cubano* have been arrested throughout the country since 15 February, including Pinar del Río, Camagüey and Santiago de Cuba. Although most were believed to have been released shortly afterwards, the whereabouts of others is not clear.

Amnesty International believes that if charged and imprisoned Dr Leonel Morejón Almagro, Lázaro González Valdés, Mercedes Parada Antúnez and Rafael Solano will be prisoners of conscience detained solely because of their peaceful attempts to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

The organization urges the authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally and further requests the Cuban Government to permit members of the groups belonging to *Concilio Cubano* -- including independent journalists attempting to compile reports about the current events -- to carry out their legitimate activities without interference.

## **BACKGROUND**

*Concilio Cubano* is a coalition of over 100 non-governmental groups including political opposition groups, human rights groups, and independent groups of journalists, lawyers, trades unionists, women and others. In December *Concilio Cubano* wrote to the Cuban authorities requesting permission to hold a national meeting between 24 and 27 February. In January they received an official acknowledgement that the letter had been received. No written response has been given but members of the coalition have been told on several occasions while in detention that the meeting would not be allowed to go ahead.

The authorities have resorted to various methods to prevent other meetings of the coalition from taking place throughout the country. On 8 February a meeting of the national leadership of *Concilio Cubano* decided that the national meeting should go ahead with or without official authorization.

*Concilio Cubano* has repeatedly stressed its commitment to using only peaceful methods to achieve its demands, which include an amnesty for all political prisoners; full respect for the present Constitution; that the Cuban Government should fulfill its international obligations with regard to human rights; various demands relating to the economy, and a call for direct and free elections based on the pluralist nature of Cuban society.

Dozens of members of *Concilio Cubano* have been detained since October 1995 and warned repeatedly that they would be charged with various offences, including spreading "enemy propaganda", "dangerousness", "illegal association" and others, if they did not give up their activities or leave the country. Some have also reported threats of violence against them or members of their families.

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