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NEWS RELEASE

Cuba: Prisoner releases – hope for a new future for human rights?

The Cuban Government's decision to release some 300 prisoners following the Pope's recent visit is a positive development and hopefully signals a future where no one is punished or imprisoned in Cuba simply for expressing their opinions, Amnesty International declared today.

So far at least 112 prisoners have reportedly been released since 12 February. They include 10 prisoners of conscience* whose release the organization had been seeking and political prisoner Eduardo Gómez Sánchez, who was in a poor state of health.

"We hope that they, and all released prisoners of conscience, will not face further harassment from the authorities because of their views and that every effort will be made to ensure that they can be integrated back into Cuban society as fully as possible," the organization urged.

Amnesty International is calling on the Cuban Government to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience. It is also calling on the government to ratify both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to review all domestic legislation to bring it into line with international human rights standards and to establish independent institutions to protect and promote all human rights.

While some prisoners of conscience are being released, trials of peaceful government opponents are still taking place. Sentencing is reportedly due to take place today of Cecilio Monteagudo Sánchez and Juan Carlos Recio Martínez, who were tried on 6 February on charges of "enemy propaganda" and "other acts against state security". They are facing possible custodial sentences of six years and 18 months' respectively. The trial of Reinaldo Alfaro García -- who has been in detention since May 1997 and is reportedly facing a possible 12-year sentence on a charge of "enemy propaganda"-- is also said to be scheduled for 20 February.

In a move which Cuban authorities have reportedly said was not related to Vatican initiatives, seven members of the unofficial *Partido Pro Derechos Humanos en Cuba* (PPDHC), Party for Human Rights in Cuba, who have been arrested in October 1997, were released at the end of January. Amnesty International considered them to be prisoners of conscience and, while welcoming their release, is concerned by reports that six of them are under pressure to leave the country against their will. The six are currently receiving medical attention in the San Juan de Dios Hospital, a civilian hospital in the city of Santa Clara, where they are recovering from the effects of a 120-day fast. The seventh, Roxana Carpio Mata, who stopped her fast when she found she was pregnant, has returned to her home.

*The 10 prisoners of conscience, who had been serving sentences of between one and 12 years on a variety of charges, are: Pascual Escalona Naranjo, Héctor Palacios Ruiz, José Carrasco Velar, Angel Luis Valiente Langer, Juan Carlos Castillo Pasto, Alexis Maestre Savorit., Osmel Lugo Gutiérrez, Nelson Mujica Pérez, José Frandín Cribé and Moisés Raúl Cintra Pacheco.

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