

EXTERNAL

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**MEDICAL CONCERN**

**Prisoners of conscience in need of medical attention**

**CUBA**

Prison conditions in Cuba have seriously deteriorated over the past two or three years, coinciding with a deterioration in living conditions for the general population as a result of the economic crisis affecting the country. Standards of nutrition, medical care and hygiene in prisoners have dropped alarmingly, and many of the prisoners are reported to be malnourished and in need of medical attention. We have recently received the following information about a number of prisoners of conscience being held in Cuban prisons.

**Sebastián ARCOS BERGNES** is Vice-President of the unofficial *Comité Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos* (CCPDH - Cuban Committee for Human Rights). Aged 63, he is a dentist and was a junior minister in an early Castro government. He served a previous term of seven years' imprisonment after he had tried to leave the country without authorization in 1981. He was re-arrested in January 1992 and sentenced in October of that year to four years and eight months' imprisonment for "enemy propaganda" on the grounds that he had "sent abroad false reports of human rights violations by the Cuban authorities which were used in campaigns of defamation against Cuba promoted by the United States".

Sebastián Arcos is currently being held in Ariza prison, Cienfuegos. During the past year the authorities are reported to have been putting pressure on him to go into exile in exchange for his early release, but he has refused to comply. Sebastián Arcos is said to have had a number of medical problems during his imprisonment including hypertension and peripheral oedema. He has also developed an area of hyperpigmentation on his back which appears to be enlarging and which requires investigation. He is reported to have lost over 10 kg in weight since his imprisonment and has been in need of dental attention for some time. Latest reports indicate that he has been transferred to the high security area of the prison where he is being held with prisoners serving long sentences for violent crimes. Sebastian Arcos is said to be without access to medical attention.

**Rubén HOYOS RUIZ** is a prisoner of conscience in his mid-forties who was arrested in March 1990 and sentenced in September of that year to six years' imprisonment on charges of "illegal association" and "enemy propaganda". He is a member of the CCPDH and also of the Jehovah's Witness movement which has been banned in Cuba since 1974. He spent a previous term of nine months in prison in 1981 for possession of literature published by the Jehovah's Witnesses. The charges of "enemy propaganda" which were brought against him in 1990 stemmed from his criticisms of the human rights situation in Cuba which he made in the name of the CCPDH.

Rubén Hoyos is being held in Alabrada de Manacas prison, Villa Clara Province, where there is reported to be a very restricted supply of food and the diet consists mainly of rice. many prisoners are

reported to have suffered considerable weight loss. Rubén Hoyos is diabetic and he is said to be almost totally blind. It is not known whether he is insulin-dependent, but he is reported to have suffered two diabetic comas in recent months. A special diet that he was receiving has recently been withdrawn.

**Alberto VALDÉS FERNÁNDEZ** is a musician in his thirties. From the information currently available, Amnesty International believes that Alberto Valdes Fernandez is a prisoner of conscience. He and his brother, Claudio, were arrested and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for links with human rights groups and the opposition movement. Claudio Valdés died in prison at the age of 34 in October 1993. The cause of his death is not known, although one report mentions poor nutrition, ill-treatment and subsequent hunger strikes. Alberto Valdés is currently held in Nueva Blanca prison and is reported to have suffered serious weight loss. His current body weight is said to be around 40 kg. He is said to be in a very poor general state of health.

**Pablo REYES MARTINEZ** is an adopted prisoner of conscience in his forties. He is a member of the executive of a dissident group known as the *Unión Cívica Nacional* and was arrested in April 1992 on charges of enemy propaganda. He was convicted of having sent abroad false reports about human rights violations in Cuba. Pablo Reyes is said to be suffering disturbed vision but has received no medical attention. Latest reports indicate that he is being held in an isolation cell in Quivicán prison and is allowed out for exercise only once in every two weeks.

### **The economic crisis in Cuba and the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur**

A trade embargo imposed on Cuba by the United States since 1962. Cuba has been plunged into economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern block, formerly Cuba's main source of economic support. The population is said to be suffering from severe shortages of food, fuel, soap, detergent, medicines and many other essential goods. Health problems which had been eradicated or kept under control, such as tuberculosis, leprosy, scabies and beri-beri have begun to recur and there have been outbreaks of typhoid and leptospirosis on some parts of the island.

Since 1992, over 50,000 Cubans, including prisoners, have developed optic neuritis which can lead to temporary or permanent disturbance or loss of vision. Those affected also suffered weight loss and muscular disorders. A WHO delegation which visited Cuba at the time attributed the incidence of optic neuritis to a combination of an unknown toxin and poor nutrition. According to the Cuban authorities, the epidemic has now virtually disappeared following distribution to the whole population of a specially-manufactured vitamin A and B supplement. However, many people, including recently-released political prisoners, still appear to be suffering the effects.

Medical equipment and many medicines are said to be in short supply in Cuba. In the first quarter of this year, the European Community provided Cuba with about 4 million dollars' worth of humanitarian aid, mainly medicines. In May 1994, the authorities introduced strict rationing of all medicines. 29 non-prescription medicines will be available at pharmacies, but will still be rationed. For example, a maximum of 40 aspirins a year will be permitted to residents of Havana and only 20 in the rest of the country. All other medicines will be available only on prescription.

It is clear that the deterioration in prison conditions in Cuba are linked at least in part to the severe shortages being experienced by the population as a whole. However, the prison population is particularly vulnerable by virtue of its dependence on the prison authorities, the insanitary condition in many prisons, the use of violence against prisoners and the lack of response by authorities to complaints of ill-treatment.

The 1993 report from the UN Special Rapporteur on Cuba noted that he had received many reports of conditions in prisons which, in his opinion, were largely inconsistent with the UN's Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, and even with the provisions of the Cuban Penal Code itself. Many of these reports related to the shortage and poor quality of the food given to prisoners which was unfit for human consumption. Spontaneous protests arising in the prisons because of food shortages were often repressed through imprisonment in special punishment areas and brutal beatings. The reports also repeatedly mentioned the alarming lack of medical care for prisoners, most of whom were in poor health because of the food situation and unhygienic prison conditions. In some prisons a number of deaths as a

result of beri-beri had been reported. The Special Rapporteur also cited two instances where prisoners appeared to have died after being denied medical attention.

With regard to beatings, he noted: "Far from being isolated incidents, they apparently are administered regularly by the prison authorities in order to punish or intimidate. Moreover, complaints of maltreatment addressed to the relevant authorities never seem to get anywhere". The scarcity of food and medicines, unhygienic living conditions and physical ill-treatment were at their worst in provincial prisons. He also noted reports about inmates at labour camps being forced to undertake arduous agricultural work in an undernourished state and sometimes sick and barefoot.

The Special Rapporteur's January 1994 report stated that problems with food, hygiene and lack of medical attention continued to be alarming and had resulted in many health problems among the prison population. He reported that anaemia, diarrhoea and skin and parasite diseases resulting from contaminated water appeared to be common in most prisons and that there had been cases of tuberculosis in some prisons.

### **Conclusions**

While recognizing that there is an economic crisis in Cuba and that the general population faces severe shortages, Amnesty International is calling for the Cuban government to ensure that prisoners have access to levels of nutrition, medical care and hygiene in keeping with the standards available to the general population. In particular, shortages of supplies are no reason for prisoners to be denied access to medical staff, and Amnesty International is calling for the four prisoners of conscience whose cases are described here, as well as all other prisoners, to have immediate access to medical care.

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To: Medical professionals  
From: Medical Office / Research Department - Americas  
Date: 9 August 1994

## ***MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION***

### **Prisoners of conscience in need of medical attention CUBA**

#### **Keywords**

Theme: medical care/ill-health/POCs

#### **Summary**

The recent economic crisis in Cuba has been associated with a severe deterioration in the standards of nutrition and medical care in prisons. Amnesty International has recently received information about four prisoners of conscience being held in Cuban prisons, all of whom are reportedly in need of medical attention but are being denied access to medical staff.

#### **Recommended Actions**

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses below:

- raising the cases of Sebastian Arcos Bergnes, Ruben Hoyos Ruiz, Alberto Valdes Fernandez and Pablo Reyes Martinez, and indicating the prisoner in which they are reportedly being held
- noting that all are said to be in need of medical attention and calling for each of these prisoners to be given immediate access to a doctor and to be provided with available medical care
- noting that Sebastian Arcos Bergnes, Ruben Hoyos Ruiz, Alberto Valdes Fernandez and Pablo Reyes Martinez are prisoners of conscience and calling for their immediate and unconditional release
- pointing out that you are aware that there is an economic crisis in Cuba causing severe general shortages, but urging that all prisoners be provided with levels of nutrition, hygiene and medical care in keeping with the standards available to the general population
- noting that there have been reports that protests of beatings to suppress protests by prisoners over lack of food and calling for the government to ensure that these beatings cease immediately.

#### **Addresses**

See paper copy for addresses of Attorney General, Minister of the Interior, with copies to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Director of Ariza Prison, Director of Alambrada de Manacas Prison, Director of Quivican prison, Director of Neuva (sic) Blanca prison