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CUBA: CUBAN AUTHORITIES SHOULD LIFT THREATS AGAINST PEACEFUL
PROTESTERS ON SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF THE SINKING OF "13 DE MARZO"
TUGBOAT

On the eve of the second anniversary of the sinking of the "13 de Marzo" tugboat, Amnesty International is again calling on the Cuban authorities to conduct an independent investigation into the incident which resulted in the death of 40 people.

The organization is also demanding that the Cuban authorities lift their threats against peaceful protesters.

"It is appalling that the authorities are harassing and intimidating those simply wishing to peacefully protest or commemorate the sinking of the tugboat," Amnesty International said today. "The authorities should also respect the rights of survivors and others who are seeking an investigation into the deaths."

On 13 July 1994, 40 people, including women and children, died when the tugboat in which they were attempting to flee from Cuba was sunk. According to survivors interviewed by Amnesty International, the tugboat was deliberately attacked and rammed by three other vessels operating under official instructions. However, Cuban officials have repeatedly denied the allegations, insisting that the boat sank because it was not seaworthy. Calls by survivors, lawyers and human rights activists in Cuba, as well as Amnesty International and other international bodies for an investigation have been ignored.

In recent days Amnesty International has received the following reports of harassment and intimidation directed against those wishing to protest or commemorate the incident. On 4 July, Aída Rosa Jiménez, national representative of the unofficial *Movimiento de Madres Cubanas por la Solidaridad*, Cuban Mothers' Solidarity Movement, was told by State Security officials that if she was planning to hold a prayer meeting on 13 July, she should do it in her home and not in a church. If she tried to go to a church, she would be imprisoned.

On 5 July Isabel del Pino Sotolongo, president of an unofficial group called *Seguidores de Cristo Rey*, Followers of Christ the King, was reportedly arrested in a Havana park where she was displaying the photos of the 40 people who died and distributing leaflets containing quotes from the Bible. She was released later that day but told that she was under investigation on several charges and that she should report to the Department of State Security on 11 July. When she went there, she was kept in detention and several hours later was still being held.

During the past week Ana María Agramonte and other members of the *Movimiento Agenda Nacionalista*, Nationalist Agenda Movement, were also summoned by police and warned not to attempt to undertake any kind of public activity or commemoration between 13 July and 5 August. Maria de los Angeles González of the *Asociación de Periodistas Independientes de Cuba (APIC)*, Cuban Association of Independent Journalists, was reportedly ordered not to leave her home until further notice under threat of imprisonment. She is also said to have received several anonymous phone calls of a threatening nature. Many other dissidents are believed to have received similar warnings and threats.

Amnesty International is calling on the Cuban authorities not to take reprisals of any kind against those seeking to exercise their legitimate rights to peacefully protest or commemorate the sinking of the tugboat, to immediately release anyone currently in detention for that reason and to lift all other kinds of restrictive measures imposed on such people.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the situation that could arise from US-based exile groups who intend to organize a flotilla of boats from Florida to approach Cuban waters on 13 July to protest about the incident. The Cuban authorities regard this as provocative and have warned that they will “take any necessary action” if they enter their waters.

BACKGROUND

In the days that followed the sinking of the tugboat in 1994, large groups of people attempted to hi-jack public ferries and other vessels in order to flee the country. On 5 August the largest anti-government demonstration for many years took place in Havana and on 6 August 1994 President Fidel Castro effectively ordered the Cuban coastguard to stop preventing people from leaving, leading to a mass exodus of some 32,000 people.

In 1995, on the first anniversary of the incident, dozens of people were warned, under threat of imprisonment, not to take part in public demonstrations and some had police guards placed on their homes to prevent them going out or were detained for short periods. This year, the general situation is more tense following a general crackdown on dissent in February leading so far to the imprisonment or forced exile abroad of some seven prominent dissidents and similar threats against dozens of others. The tension was further heightened on 24 February by the shooting down in disputed circumstances of two small civilian planes belonging to a Cuban exile group by the Cuban Air Force, resulting in four deaths.

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