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Cuba: Dozens arrested at funeral of prominent rights activist

The Cuban authorities' arrest and short-term detention of more than 40 activists as they paid their respects at the funeral of human rights activist Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas is another sign of how entrenched repression against dissidents on the island remains, Amnesty International said.

Among those arrested and shoved onto buses immediately following Tuesday's funeral mass in the capital Havana were former prisoner of conscience Félix Navarro Rodríguez and outspoken dissident journalist Guillermo Fariñas.

Elizardo Sánchez, President of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, told Amnesty International how as many as 200 state security and police officers descended on the street outside the church in the Havana neighbourhood of El Cerro and began roughing up the mourners and bundling them into buses.

"The authorities don't want the public to know how many people were there and that we're not afraid of them," Guillermo Fariñas told Amnesty International after his release.

The journalist said the police pushed him to the ground outside the church, before forcing him to board the bus with around 20 other mourners, the majority of whom were also mistreated by police. Many shouted chants including "Long live Oswaldo!" and "freedom for Cuba!"

They were then held at different locations in the capital, including Tarará Police School in East Havana. Most of them, including Guillermo Fariñas and Félix Navarro Rodríguez were released several hours later and it appears the last of those held were let go on Wednesday morning.

"Tuesday's events follow the pattern of short-term detentions and imprisonments we've seen the Cuban authorities carry out time and again as a form of intimidation against dissidents and human rights activists," said Gerardo Ducos, Amnesty International's Cuba researcher.

"Indeed, it was the very kind of repression which Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas dedicated his life to combating before his tragic death last weekend."

Payá, whose funeral the activists were attending, fell victim to a road accident on Sunday in eastern Cuba's Granma Province.

The longtime activist was leader of the "Liberation" Christian Movement (Movimiento Cristiano Liberación, MCL) and had spent time in a labour camp in the 1960s for his beliefs.

In 2005, the European Parliament awarded him the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought – which has also been awarded to Guillermo Fariñas and the Ladies in White (Damas de Blanco) activism group.

An official investigation has been opened into Payá's death as his family members raised questions about the exact circumstances of the car crash.