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Cuba: Escalation of repression must be halted

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Amnesty International is extremely concerned at the unprecedented crackdown on human rights which has taken place in Cuba in recent months. A new report published today, *Cuba: "Essential measures"? Human rights crackdown in the name of security* details a massive increase in the number of prisoners of conscience and calls on Cuba to immediately halt executions and resume its three-year *de facto* moratorium on executions. The report also highlights the impact of the United States embargo on human rights in Cuba and recommends that the US government revise its policy with a view to ending its trade embargo.

In mid-March 2003, after a period of apparent movement towards a more open and permissive approach, Cuban authorities carried out an unprecedented clampdown on the dissident movement on the island. Over the space of a few days, security forces rounded up over 75 dissidents in targeted sweeps. With the exception of half a dozen well-known figures critical of the regime, most mid-level leaders of the dissident movement, people who had been activists for a decade or more, were detained. They were subjected to hasty and unfair trials, and, just weeks after their initial arrest, were given long prison terms of up to 28 years. Cuban authorities tried some of them under harsh, previously unused legislation.

In early April 2003, the Cuban government ended a three-year *de facto* moratorium on executions, killing by firing squad three men who had been involved in a hijacking. They had been subjected to a summary trial and appeals process, and were executed less than a week after their trial began.

"The Cuban government must immediately halt executions, and abolish once and for all the death penalty from the Cuban legal system."

Amnesty International condemns these serious violations, and the increasing disregard for international human rights standards that they represent. In spite of Cuban government claims that those arrested were "foreign agents" whose activities endangered Cuban independence and security, and having reviewed the legal documents of many of the 75 dissidents sentenced, Amnesty International believes that they are prisoners of conscience.

"Giving interviews to US-based media or sending information to organizations like Amnesty International was mentioned in some of the verdicts as arguments for the conviction of the dissidents.

Those activities clearly fall within the parameters of the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and association and should not be punished by imprisonment."

"Amnesty International considers that the 75 dissidents are prisoners of conscience and asks for their immediate and unconditional release."

The Cuban authorities have justified the executions as well as the crackdown against the dissidents on the need to defend themselves against the provocations and threats posed to its national security by the United States. While Amnesty International believes that this cannot justify the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience or other violations of fundamental rights, the report recognizes the negative effect of the US embargo on the full range of human rights in Cuba.

"The economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States against Cuba has served as an ongoing justification for Cuban state repression and has contributed to the climate in which human rights violations occur," Amnesty International said.

"The embargo provides the Cuban government with an excuse for its repressive policies, and has had a detrimental influence on nutrition, health, education and many other spheres of life, disproportionately harming the weakest and most vulnerable members of society."

"Specific embargo provisions such as the allocation of significant amounts of aid for "democracy building" have made it easier for the Cuban government to portray political dissidents as foreign sympathisers, ultimately weakening the prospects for a strong human rights movement in the country," Amnesty International concluded.

Full copies of the report are available at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR250172003>

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