

AI Index: PRE 01/487/2012
11 October 2012

Cuba: Activists must be allowed to mark anniversary of leader's death unhindered

The Cuban authorities must allow a group of local activists known as the Ladies in White to commemorate freely the first anniversary of the death of their leader Laura Pollán on 14 October in Havana, Amnesty International said today.

Laura Pollán died of cardio-respiratory arrest on 14 October 2011.

The activists – who will be travelling from across the country - plan to attend mass at the Church of Santa Rita in Havana and carry out a silent march.

“Given the Cuban authorities’ shameful record when it comes to the treatment of human rights activists, we are concerned for the safety of the Ladies in White as they commemorate the anniversary of the death of one of their members,” said Javier Zúñiga Mejía Borja, Special Advisor for Regional Programmes at Amnesty International.

“Our request is simple: the Cuban authorities must ensure that the Ladies in White and other activists in the country can express themselves freely.”

Members of the Ladies in White have been subjected to a permanent campaign of intimidation, harassment and short term detentions to stop them from peacefully campaigning for the release of political prisoners and greater civil and political freedoms in Cuba.

On 20 September around 50 members of the group were arrested as they travelled to Havana to participate in activities to celebrate the feast day of Our Lady of Mercy (Virgen de la Merced) and in memory of late political activists.

They were held for several days before being released without charge. Various members of the Ladies in White based in the capital also received intimidating notes aimed at discouraging them from taking part in activities.

On 17 March, 18 Ladies in White were arrested during a peaceful demonstration on the ninth anniversary of a crackdown on dissidence which led to the imprisonment of 75 government critics.

All were released except for Niurka Luque Álvarez, who was released on 5 October pending trial on charges of “violence or intimidation” against a state official (“atentado”).

On 18 March, Lady in White Sonia Garro Alfonso, and her husband, Ramón Alejandro Muñoz González, were detained at their home in Havana when around 50 police forced their way into the house and fired rubber bullets at them. They remain in prison without charge.

In February this year, authorities in Cuba prevented members of the Ladies in White from reaching the group's headquarters to attend an event in memory of the second anniversary of the death of activist Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died on hunger strike in protest at his unfair incarceration. Those who had already congregated inside remained there for nearly 48 hours as they feared they would be arrested if they tried to leave.

"We are all peaceful women, we have the right to walk on the streets of our country and campaign for the freedom of all political prisoners and for greater freedoms in Cuba," said Berta Soler, spokesperson for the Ladies in White.

Background information

The organization Ladies in White was formed by a group of female relatives of the 75 prisoners of conscience who were imprisoned in March 2003 for their peaceful expression of critical opinions of the government.

The group attends mass every Sunday in the capital, Havana, dressed in white, to pray for the release of their relatives. Afterwards they take part in a procession from the church to a nearby park, carrying white flowers. Following the release of all the prisoners of conscience from the March 2003 crackdown, the Ladies in White have been campaigning for the release of other political prisoners and for the lifting of restrictions on fundamental civil and political freedoms in Cuba.

Laura Pollán died of cardio-respiratory arrest on 14 October 2011. Her husband, Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez, was one of 75 individuals arrested and sentenced during a crackdown against peaceful dissidents in 2003, all of whom Amnesty International adopted as prisoners of conscience. Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in March 2003 and conditionally released on 12 February 2011.