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Cuba: Government must show commitment to human rights by releasing activists

The Cuban government should immediately release the 57 prisoners of conscience who have been held for over six years and respect the right to freedom expression and association, said Amnesty International today.

The call came on the 6th anniversary of the March 2003 crackdown against political and human rights activists in the country.

“There was no valid reason for the original detention of the 57 men and there is certainly no reason for them to remain in prison,” said Gerardo Ducos, Cuba researcher at Amnesty International “The only ‘crime’ they committed was the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.”

Amnesty International is also concerned at the ongoing harassment faced by human rights activists, particularly those involved in preparations for the upcoming 18 March demonstration.

Ivonne Mallesá, from the organization Damas de Blanco, was reportedly detained at her home on 10 March by members of the State Security forces. She was taken to a casa de visita - a government premises used to organize public events and meetings. After four hours she was released without charge. Security officials told her that she would be sent to prison for 20 years if she continued to support the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), an unofficial group formed by women who are relatives and friends of the people imprisoned in the March 2003 crackdown.

“Cuban officials have many times talked about the importance of human rights. Now they have an opportunity to turn their words into action by releasing those who have been imprisoned unfairly,” said Gerardo Ducos.

Background Information

Fifty-four of the 57 current prisoners of conscience in Cuba are the remainder of a group of 75 people jailed in the context of a massive crackdown against the dissident movement in March 2003. Most of them were charged with crimes including “acts against the independence of the state” because they allegedly received funds and/or materials from US-based NGOs financed by the United States government. They were sentenced to between six and 28 years in prison after speedy and unfair trials for engaging in activities the authorities perceived as subversive and damaging to Cuba.

These activities included publishing articles or giving interviews to US-funded media, communicating with international human rights organizations and having contact with entities or individuals viewed to be hostile to Cuba. Twenty-one have so far been released, some conditionally on medical grounds.

Among the jailed political opponents is Víctor Rolando Arroyo Carmona, an independent librarian and vice-president of the unofficial organization Foro para la Reforma (Forum for Reform). He was arrested on 18 March 2003 and sentenced less than three weeks later to 26 years in prison. The activities the prosecution cited against him included setting up a library with more than 6,000 books of 'reactionary' character, collaborating with press agencies not accredited by the Cuban government and having been awarded the Hellman/Hammet human rights prize by Human Rights Watch. He is currently being held in 'Cuba Sí' Prison in Holguín Province.

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