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Cuba's 'ladies in white' at risk of beatings and intimidation

Amnesty International urged Cuban President Raúl Castro to ensure the safety of a group of female relatives of prisoners of conscience ahead of a scheduled demonstration today.

The call came after a protest by the Damas de Blanco (ladies in white) yesterday was forcibly broken up by Cuban police, who briefly detained several women.

After the incident, some of the women said they had been beaten by the police. They include Reyna Tamayo, mother of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died on 22 February 2010, having spent several weeks on hunger strike to demand the release of prisoners of conscience.

“The Cuban authorities must stop repressing legitimate dissent and harassing those who are only asking for justice and exercising their freedom of expression,” said Kerrie Howard, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International. “Instead, they should review their repressive legislation and release all those who have been detained for years sentenced in summary trials on charges that are often baseless.”

The Damas de Blanco, an unofficial group of women relatives and friends of individuals imprisoned around a major crackdown around the 18 March 2003, have organized daily demonstrations in Havana during the week of the seventh anniversary of the arrests. 53 of those arrested in March 2003 continue to be detained.

Since the start of their campaign, members of the Damas de Blanco have been victims of threats and intimidation by Cuban security officials.

On 15 March, State security officials visited Soledad Riva’s home and advised her against taking part in the events organized by the Damas de Blanco. The officials warned her that if she took part in a demonstration she could risk being beaten and would not see her children again. Her children live abroad and Soledad has been seeking an exit visa to visit them, which so far has not been granted by Cuban authorities.

Soledad Rivas’ husband is a former prisoner of conscience Roberto de Miranda Hernández, a demonstrator who was detained in March 2003 but released in June 2004 on health grounds.

On 16 March, several members of the Damas de Blanco were intimidated by government supporters during a march they had organized to call for the release of their relatives in prison.

Government supporters shouted insults at them and physically assaulted William Cepero Garcia a man supporting the protest. Hugo Damian Prieto and Juan Carlos Vasallo, two men who were supporting the demonstration, were detained.

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