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CUBA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEARS FURTHER ESCALATION OF REPRESSION OF DISSIDENTS INSIDE CUBA

Increased tensions between the Governments of Cuba and the United States following the shooting down of two Cuban exile planes last Saturday could lead to a further escalation of repression inside the country, Amnesty International said today.

“This incident should not be used to obscure what is happening inside Cuba -- arrests of opposition members over the past two weeks still continue,” the organization said.

“Judging from past experience at similar moments of high tension, the possibility of violent reprisals against known government opponents by pro-government mobs cannot be ruled out.”

Amnesty International is calling on all parties involved to cooperate fully with the investigation to be carried out by the International Civil Aviation Authority of the shooting down of the two planes belonging to *Hermanos al Rescate*, Brothers to the Rescue, which resulted in the loss of four lives.

Ten days before the incident the Cuban authorities began to round up members of *Concilio Cubano*, Cuban Concilium, a coalition of some 140 non-governmental groups including political opposition groups, human rights groups, journalists, lawyers, trade unionists, women and others, which was set up in October 1995.

Over the weekend of 24 to 25 February, when a national conference of *Concilio Cubano* would have started, police guards were posted outside the homes of many members of the coalition to prevent them from going out and receiving visitors. Others were taken into detention, some for the second or third time in a period of days.

Arrests have continued during the past week. Many phone lines have been cut off making it difficult to establish exactly who is still in detention and likely to face possible charges, though some 20 people are thought to be still held at the time of writing.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the situation of Rafael Solano, director of *Habana Press*, an independent press agency and part of *Concilio Cubano*, who has been detained at least ten times over the past nine months. He was again arrested on 27 February and has reportedly been taken to Villa Marista, the headquarters of the Department of State Security.

During this latest crackdown, most detainees were held in local police stations or the Technical Investigations Department and those imprisoned charged with minor offences of a criminal nature. The fact that Rafael Solano, and possibly others, have been transferred to Villa Marista suggests that serious charges of a political nature may be brought against them.

Amnesty International believes that Rafael Solano is a prisoner of conscience detained solely for his attempts to exercise his freedom of expression and association, and that he should be released immediately. He should be granted immediate access to a lawyer of his choice and be permitted family visits.

Amnesty International is calling on the Cuban authorities to immediately stop detaining and harassing those inside Cuba who are trying to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly as established by internationally-recognized human rights standards.

## BACKGROUND

The Cuban Government alleges that *Concilio Cubano*, whose avowed aims are entirely peaceful, is funded and supported by the US Government. From the time that it was set up, its members have faced frequent short-term detention and harassment as well as threats of physical violence.

There is also evidence of a deliberate campaign on the part of the authorities to try to discredit it by attempting to link it with US-based Cuban exile groups who openly advocate the violent overthrow of President Castro. However, Amnesty International has so far not received any convincing evidence to suggest that *Concilio Cubano* as such has been involved in activities that are other than peaceful.

Both the Cuban exile groups and the domestic opposition groups cover a broad range of opinion and while there are some who advocate or even attempt to carry out terrorist action against the Cuban Government, many are opposed to violence and are calling on the government to respect their civil and political rights in the hope of achieving political change through peaceful means.

*Concilio Cubano* had been hoping to hold a national conference in Havana between 24 to 29 February and had sought government permission to do so. No formal response had been received by early February but the group had expressed its intention to go ahead with the gathering. In mid-February a senior government official informed one of the coalition leaders verbally that the meeting was banned and the National Coordinating Council of *Concilio Cubano* decided to postpone it. Nevertheless, between 15 and 24 February, some 100 people were detained throughout the country, though mainly in Havana, and warned that they would face imprisonment on a variety of charges if they did not stop their activities or leave the country. Some also alleged that they were warned that if they failed to do so, "the people" would be set upon them.

On 22 and 23 February respectively, two of the national leaders of *Concilio Cubano*, Lázaro González Valdés and Dr Leonel Morejón Almagro, were brought to trial and sentenced to prison terms. Amnesty International believes that they are prisoners of conscience imprisoned solely for their peaceful political activities.

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