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Cuba: Doctor facing 13-year sentence for “enemy propaganda” should be immediately released

Amnesty International is today calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Cuban doctor and prisoner of conscience, Desi Mendoza Rivero, who is facing a possible 13-year sentence next Monday for using the mass media to spread “enemy propaganda”.

“Desi Mendoza Rivero was detained simply for accusing the Cuban authorities of covering up the true extent of a dengue fever epidemic and of not taking sufficient measures to control it,” Amnesty International said today. “Expressing views which are at odds with official positions is no reason to be taken to court.”

Forty-three-year-old Dr Mendoza, who has been in detention since his arrest on 25 June 1997 and is currently held in Boniato Prison, just outside Santiago de Cuba, was tried in that city on 18 November. Sentencing is expected on 24 November. The basis of the charge against him was that he had issued statements, which were later disseminated by foreign newspapers and broadcast media, regarding an epidemic of dengue fever in Santiago de Cuba which, according to him, had caused several deaths.

According to reports of the six-hour trial, the prosecution requested a 13-year sentence for Dr Mendoza, who was able to speak on his own behalf for some 40 minutes. His lawyer refuted each of the allegations against him and refrained from requesting a lower sentence on the grounds that in his view Dr Mendoza had committed no crime. When several members of the public applauded the lawyer’s statement, they were removed from the courtroom.

All media in Cuba are state-controlled and dissidents are frequently arrested and imprisoned for speaking out against the government and criticizing its policies. In 1994, Dr Mendoza founded the *Colegio Médico Independiente de Santiago de Cuba*, Santiago de Cuba Independent Medical Association, an unofficial organization not recognized by the Cuban authorities of which he is president, and it is believed that the action against him may be at least partly in reprisal for his peaceful activities with that organization.

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