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Cuban human rights activist in maximum security prison must be released

Amnesty International today adopted its 55th prisoner of conscience in Cuba and urged President Raúl Castro to release him immediately and unconditionally.

Darsi Ferrer, Director of the 'Juan Bruno Zayas' Health and Human Rights Centre in Havana, has been detained since July 2009 on spurious charges of receiving illegally obtained goods, an offence usually immediately bailed.

He has not been brought to trial and he's being held in a maximum security prison in Havana intended for inmates who have been convicted of violent crimes.

"The accusation against Darsi Ferrer is clearly a pretext. We believe he was detained as a punishment for his work to promote freedom of expression in Cuba," said Gerardo Ducos, Cuba researcher at Amnesty International.

Although the offence with which Darsi Ferrer is charged would normally be reviewed by a local magistrate, his case is being handled by the General Prosecutors Office, fuelling the argument that this case is politically motivated. The activist has been detained many times before in connection with his protest activities.

"Anyone charged with this crime would normally be awaiting trial on bail, not held in a maximum security prison. This is yet another attempt by the Cuban authorities to hinder the work of human rights activist in Cuba," said Gerardo Ducos.

On Monday, Amnesty International's prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo died after reportedly being on hunger strike for several weeks in protest at prison conditions. He was arrested in March 2003 and was serving a total sentence of 36 years.

Darsi Ferrer and his wife Yusnaimy were arrested without a valid warrant in Havana on 9 July 2009, hours before they were due to participate in a demonstration to promote freedom of expression.

They were interrogated for several hours and Darsi Ferrer was handcuffed and beaten by eight police officers. They were released without charge several hours later.

On 21 July 2009 Darsi Ferrer was arrested again and told he was being taken to a police station to answer questions about building materials the police had confiscated during their previous detention. However, he was falsely detained, driven to a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Havana and charged with receiving illegally obtained goods.

Darsi Ferrer claims the building materials, two sacks of cement and some iron girders, were given to him by a colleague who had left the country and had not finished refurbishing his own house. The materials had been on the porch of the house in full view from the street months before the authorities came to confiscate them.