

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/089/2008
18 March 2008

Cuba: Five years too many, new government must release jailed dissidents

On the 5th anniversary of the largest crackdown against political opponents in Cuba, Amnesty International today called on the new Cuban authorities to immediately release the 58 dissidents still being held in jails across the country.

“Five years is five years too many. The only crime committed by these 58 is the peaceful exercise of their fundamental freedoms. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience. They must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director for Amnesty International’s Americas Programme.

In February 2008, Amnesty International welcomed the release of four prisoners of conscience and Cuba’s signing of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

“The new Cuban President, Raul Castro, has to follow the recent positive actions by tackling some of the most pressing human rights issues in the country – including judicial review of all sentences passed after unfair trials, the abolition of the death penalty and the introduction of measures to guarantee freedom of expression and independence of the judiciary,” said Kerrie Howard.

Fifty-five of the 58 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 received funds and/or materials from the United States government in order to engage 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. The men were sentenced to between six and 28 years of prison after speedy and dubious trials. Twenty have so far been conditionally released on medical grounds.

Among the jailed political opponents is doctor and human rights defender Marcelo Cano Rodríguez. He was arrested in the city of Las Tunas on 25 March 2003 as he was investigating the arrest of another doctor, Jorge Luis García Paneque, detained during the crackdown on dissidents on the island. Marcelo Cano Rodríguez was tried, convicted and sentenced to 18 years in prison. The activities the prosecution cited against him included visiting prisoners and their families as part of his work with the Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos (Cuban Human Rights Commission); and maintaining ties to the international organization Médicos sin Fronteras, Doctors without Borders. He is currently being held in Ariza prison in the city of Cienfuegos, around 250 km south-east of his home in the capital, Havana, where his family lives making family visits difficult.

“By continuing to hold political opponents for exercising fundamental freedoms, the Cuban authorities are failing to step up to their human rights commitments,” said Kerrie Howard.

A full list of the 58 political activists unfairly imprisoned in Cuba will be available from 18 March on:
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/cuba-list-prisoners-of-conscience>