Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/02/27/imprisoned-dangerousness-cuba

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Click. And then silence.

It was the sound I dreaded in my calls to Cuba. As I gathered testimony from relatives of political prisoners, I never knew what an abrupt end to the call meant.

Had the Cuban intelligence services cut the line, or was it just the shoddy phone system? I would call back immediately, often getting a busy signal or a recorded message that the number was not in service. If I found out what had happened, it was usually days or weeks later.

"A neighbor dropped by to check on me, someone sospechoso."

"I don't know, my phone just stopped working."

For months I made -- and lost -- these calls. Because Cuba does not allow visits from human rights groups, we are forced to gather information from phone interviews, reports from local groups and the rare copies of prison sentences smuggled out by visiting relatives.

For nearly five decades, Fidel Castro silenced virtually all forms of dissent in Cuba, locking up anyone who dared to criticize his government. After ailing health forced him to hand control to his younger brother in 2006, many hoped that repression would ease. But Ral Castro has allowed scores of political prisoners arrested under Fidel to languish. One of those, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, died last week after an 85-day hunger strike, which he had undertaken to protest the conditions in which he was held.

Ral Castro has also incarcerated scores more political prisoners, such as Ramn Velsquez, who completed a three-year sentence in January, but was reportedly detained again following Zapata Tamayo's death. I first spoke to Ramn's wife, Brbara, on the phone last March. She told me how on Dec. 10, 2006, they had set out with their 18-year-old daughter, Rufina, on a "march of dignity" across Cuba to call for respect for human rights and freedom for political prisoners.

They marched silently, from east to west, sleeping on roadsides or in the homes of people who took them in. Along their way, police detained them, they were attacked and cars even ran them off the road. They kept marching. In January 2007, more than 185 miles from where they started, Ramn was arrested. He was accused of "dangerousness," tried in a closed hearing and sentenced to three years in prison.

Under Cuba's "dangerousness" law, authorities can imprison people who have not committed a crime on the suspicion that they might commit one in the future. "Dangerous" activities include handing out copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, writing articles critical of the government and trying to start an independent union.

Brbara and I spoke several times over the following months about her trips to visit Ramn in prison; about her son Ren, who took care of her; and about how Rufina had fled to the United States after her father's arrest.

My organization repeatedly sought permission to visit Cuba but never received a response. Eventually, we decided to go anyway. To minimize risks, we told no one we were coming. Last summer a colleague and I rented a car in Havana and drove east, conducting interviews along the way. We stayed nowhere for longer than a day.

When we arrived at the Velsquez home on the outskirts of Las Tunas, only Ren was there. Brbara was on her way back from visiting Ramn in prison, he said.

We sat in a small kitchen with a dirt floor. Inside were two small chairs, a worn wooden table and a single-burner gas stove. A door

opened on a room just big enough to fit a mattress and a dresser.

Ren told us he had not been on the march and did not consider himself political. But shortly after his father's arrest, he came home to find "Death to the worms of house 58," his family's address, spray-painted on the nearby bus stop. A week later, he was fired from his longtime hospital job. Members of the local "revolutionary defense committee" -- the neighborhood association connected with the Communist Party -- insulted him in the street and tried to pick fights. A man was assigned to watch him and his mother; he stood on their corner and followed them as they came and went.

Ren's girlfriend stopped talking to him on her parents' orders. So did most of his friends, who were warned by police that they would find themselves in trouble if they kept hanging around a "counterrevolutionary."

"It's like having someone plant a boot right in the middle of my chest and applying so much pressure I can hardly breathe," Ren told us. "Some days I wake up and I think: I have nothing. I am nobody. I have no dreams left for my future." We encountered this profound sense of isolation time and again in visits with the families of political prisoners.

Soon Brbara arrived from her five-hour journey. Exhausted, she talked for a few minutes and then went to lie down.

"For weeks after they arrested my father, she didn't leave that bed," Ren whispered. The upside, he said, laughing, was that he'd been forced to teach himself to cook.

When we left, Ren insisted on walking us to our car. We headed down the dirt road outside their home, past neighbors who stopped their conversations and stared, and past the man on the corner, who trailed a few yards behind us. When we reached the car, Ren hugged us and asked us to pass a message to his sister, to whom he hadn't spoken in months: "Tell her we're fine -- not to worry."

As we drove away, I looked in the rearview mirror. Ren turned around and walked home, past the watchful gaze of his neighbors.

Concentration and Abuse of Power in Chvez's Venezuela

The Case of Jean-Claude Duvalier