

Cuba Steps Up Internal Repression: Human Rights' Rapporteurs Threatened

Blind dissident leader at risk

January 24, 2010. Summit, New Jersey. Cuban opposition leader Juan Carlos González Leiva, Executive Secretary of the Cuban Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, has made an earnest appeal to the international community for protection. This past week, the Cuban regime stepped-up its repressive tactics and several leaders of Cuba's opposition movement have been beaten and arrested.

The Cuban Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs is a coalition of almost 500 human rights' monitors representing almost 70 groups and includes political prisoners in 50 prisons (of over 250 believed to be in existence). It reports the most egregious violations against citizens and human rights defenders all throughout Cuba.

Directorio, a Miami-based human rights organization, issued an alert on January 21st that included a recorded telephone message from Havana by González Leiva, who is a blind lawyer, (see www.directorio.org.) He described how on Wednesday, January 20th, Cuban government officials attempted to forcibly move him and his wife, independent journalist Tania Maceda, to his home province of Ciego de Avila, claiming he is in the capital illegally. They resisted and bunkered themselves inside the home and are relying on friends and supporters to bring them food. He vowed to continue working on the Council's 2009 Annual Report of human rights abuses.

In mid-2007, González Leiva had officially switched his residence to the Havana apartment of a blind friend, Sergio Díaz Larrastegui, in compliance with laws allowing those assisting the handicapped to live in their homes. Having endured imprisonment, beatings, threats, and other abuses by the government for years, González Leiva sought access to internet from diplomatic missions in the capital, greater protection from international journalists stationed there, and greater organizational capacity for the Council. By banishing González Leiva and Maceda to the far-away province, the regime seeks to ostracize them and prevent the Council's reports from being broadcast abroad. Council members throughout the island have been subjected to a steady diet of harassment, threats, and detentions, their email accounts have been cancelled and tape recorders confiscated.

On January 12th, González Leiva had made a first appeal for help after authorities removed Díaz Larrastegui from his job as a computer specialist, seized his computer, and threatened him with prison. This followed his continuing refusals to allow cameras and microphones in his home and inform on visitors. The campaign to force him into evicting his friends had started in earnest last fall with a visit from State Security followed by attempts to organize neighbors into staging an act of repudiation against them.

Cuba Archive has been in touch with González Leiva since last Friday. He describes their plight with a sense of urgency, but a calm demeanor and expressing the strong faith he is known for. The Council's work has been very valuable to Cuba Archive's documentation of deaths and disappearances ever since it began issuing monthly reports in 2007. Arguably, the noticeable decrease of fatalities of the latter half of 2009 might be attributed to the international diffusion of Council reports on the alarming number of deaths occurring inside the prisons. Because the Cuban regime has been historically sensitive to international public opinion, organizations and governments worldwide should demand protection of the Council's work and of its members and should call for a cessation of efforts by the Cuban government to silence and isolate its leadership.

For a summary on the Council and photos, see www.CubaArchive.org, section "Documenting inside Cuba." Contact information for Juan Carlos González Leiva (Cuban Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs): Calle Mayía Rodríguez, edif.459 apt. 305 e/t Carmen y Patrocinio, La Víbora, Ciudad Habana; Home Tel. 011 (537) 649 96 63, Mobile 011 (535) 273 09 68; relatorescubanos@gmail.com.