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**BIENVENIDO
EL PAPA**

cuba and the church

The Catholic Church in Cuba has recently been marked by a fierce controversy. Although the relationship between the Church and the State is always conflicting, it is clear that more issues are likely to arise in a country which has been cradling a communist dictatorship regime since 1959 – the year in which the leaders of the Revolution imposed atheism on the Cuban nation. Yet, the Church did not cease to exist then: despite the cruel repression, or perhaps precisely because of that as the forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest, there has been a dramatic flourish of Catholicism in Cuba; possibly it was a means of spiritual escape from a too pragmatic and earthly world, which had begun to fall apart too soon.

However, over the years, the role of the Church in Cuba has become ambiguous and many Cuban Catholics feel disappointed. As the recent visit of Pope Benedict XVI received full support of the State, it has not only intensified the contradictions of the regime, which, on the one hand, uses violence to prevent citizens from exercising faith, but on the other hand, receives the Pope with all honours; it has also shown that the Church is too lenient with the government and stays away from the conflicts of dissident Catholics.

Most of the independent journalists writing for us agree that people are disillusioned about the Church; some wonder if it's the Pope's responsibility to do something to change the situation in Cuba. The articles in this newsletter tell stories about days spent in jail during the Pope's visit, about the wave of repression unleashed several weeks before the Pope's visit, and they also analyse the controversial figure of Cardinal Ortega and narrate the history of the Catholic Church in the island with the aim to provide a complete view of the possible role of the Church in Cuba.

Most importantly, the last article brings a philosophical reflection on the rela-

tionship between the Church and the Cuban State – two antagonistic powers that have paradoxically, to the detriment of the people, become closer. Cuba seems to be still far from being a free State with a free Church. ←



praying to ratzinger behind the bars of the revolution

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo →

The prison guards had a radio on. It was a small transistor radio – an obsolete thing like everything else in the Police Station of La Regla, a town across the Havana bay.

The interrogation offices were decorated in an antiquated style typical for Soviet-like political propaganda: Pictures of the assault on the Moncada Barracks, of the Granma yacht landing, of Che Guevara's bandaged arm, of the wide-brimmed hat of the disappeared Comandante Camilo... all the icons of the beginning of the Revolution, and all of them bearing Fidel Castro's quotes.

The walls of the prison glowed with a fresh coat of paint. In a way, it seemed as if they painted the prison in my honour, which filled me with horror. Down in the barred basement, behind the giant padlocks, I got an inconsolable feeling of loneliness. I had no criminal record and this was the first time I was put to jail. In fact, they caught me like a wild animal in a hunt. I was arrested in the street but there no criminal charges were made against me. The task force that took me in did not identify themselves, they didn't inform my family or friends, they had no legal authorization to detain me and keep me in prison for two days – the two days that Pope Benedict XVI spent on a visit to Havana – a bizarre event of beatitude and barbarism mixed together. Or, if you like, downright Kafkaesque reality on the shores of the Caribbean Sea.

On Tuesday morning, March 29, the day of the Pope's mass in the Plaza de la Revolucion, the Cuban capital woke up to a nightmare: The whole city was under control of agents and officers, both uniformed and in civilian clothes. They caused traffic jam. They intimidated and arbitrarily detained countless independent journalists, human rights activists, political opponents, as well as beggars and vendors without licenses. And they did all of this before the very eyes of international press correspondents, who were concentrating all

their attention on the figure of Joseph Ratzinger, standing in front of his altar, and on facial expressions that the President Raul Castro made at each word of subtle meaning in the Pope's homily.

Days before that, state telephone companies, ETECSA and CUBACEL, participated in the operation, which was unofficially called "Vote of Silence", by blocking thousands of telephone lines – without any technical reason, without prior notice and with no right to compensation. Even the highly limited internet services, which are available in Cuba only to two privileged groups – foreigners and elite officials, were cut.

From the very beginning of my imprisonment, I stopped eating and drinking water. I also tried not to pay much attention to the provocation of a State Security attorney, who reminded me of a character from *Minority Report*. To fill up the time before the Pope takes off to Vatican, he accused me of an alleged "subversive activity" and "public scandal", for which he didn't need any proof. H. G. Wells's time machine kept by the Cuban counter-intelligence organization in the Museum of the Cold War has apparently retained all its functions intact. I wonder why they don't rename the organization to "Cuban counter-citizen forces".

Thus, only the small battery-operated radio from the socialist times kept me in touch with the rest of the world beyond the bars of the modern catacombs in which I was imprisoned. Radio broadcasting was the only way I could learn about the passing of time during my imprisonment, which turned to something like the longest dawn in my life. I already started to feel weakness in the muscles and lack of glucose in the brain, when I finally heard the liturgical songs sung during the only hijacked Mass in the history of Catholicism.

It was a sad scene. The Mass was attended by atheist workers, Marxist-Lenin-

ist or rather Stalinist labour unionists, not to mention State Security members disguised as Red Cross staff or, who knows, maybe even altar boys. The parishes were denied the right to freely decide which parishioners would go to the Mass as there were "black lists" of people and if anybody's name was on this list, the person would be instantly dropped off the official bus – the only means of accessing the Plaza de la Revolucion, where the Mass was celebrated. The famous square, whose podium has so many times in history turned to a tribunal of blind masses led by their supreme leader (whom the Catholic Church excommunicated dozens of years ago), hysterically chanting "Death to traitors."

The Mass served by Benedict XVI seemed endless. By instinct, I knelt and prayed. It was my first time in prison and I didn't pray to God, but to Joseph Ratzinger himself. I implored him to make his speech shorter, to skip the formalities of the Eucharistic liturgy, I begged that he wouldn't extend the meeting between the Catholic Church and the Communist Party prescribed by the diplomatic protocol, I prayed that he wouldn't return the victimizing smiles of the Cardinal de Cuba, I wished that the Pope-mobile could speed him off directly from the altar to the Havana international airport and, if it's not heresy, I also prayed that the Holy Father would never again accept an invitation that would lead to suppression of poor people in this or any other country-prison. ←



prayers and abuses

Chronicle of the Arrival of Pope Benedict XVI in Cuba

Jorge Olivera Castillo →

Pope Benedict XVI has come to Cuba with a message of peace, freedom and reconciliation. Yet, only one week before his visit, the country had seen a new wave of arrests of human rights activists, dissidents and members of *Damas de Blanco*. The political police has been laying siege to the homes of hundreds of regime opponents in different parts of the country in order to prevent them from coming to Santiago de Cuba or Havana, where the Pope is expected to officiate masses.

“I myself had been arrested for about 12 hours before they sent me back to Havana, where I live,” said Julio Aleaga, freelance journalist, who had come to Santiago de Cuba to make a report on the mass of the Pope and was arrested by the State Security on 23 March. “Dozens of opponents are still behind the bars or under home arrest in some nearby areas,” he added.

Meanwhile, in Havana, many workers are threatened with being expelled from their jobs if they fail to attend the mass that will be officiated by *His Holiness* on March 28 in the Plaza de la Revolución. “The attendance in the mass is compulsory. Those who don’t obey won’t be paid the salary for the day and the case will be looked into,” says Ramon, employee of the company named PRODAL. “If you fail to present compelling reasons justifying your absence, you can be expelled from work.”

Although it may not be obvious at first glance, it is as if the country were at war. One would expect that the Pope’s visit would result in a reduction of the repressive environment in Cuba, but it’s the other way round: the government has shown its willingness to continue implementing forcible measures with all possible rigour. The number of arrests followed by several-hour long imprisonment in dirty, unventilated cells filled with filthy stench, so common in the past few months, seems to be on the increase.

Unlike at war, the mobilized public is not wearing the military olive green. Those who have been called up this time are members of the Party, the communist youth, former members of the Army, and the Political Police – all of them dressed in civilian clothes, shoulder to shoulder with assault groups spreading terror by the persistent and creative employment of the clubs and iron bars they are hiding under their clothes.

Thirteen regime opponents were forced to leave the La Caridad church in Havana on the night of March 15 after they had locked themselves in the church, asking for an audience by the Pope, whom they wanted to hear their pleas. “At 9 pm, the pastor of the La Caridad church and Monsignor Suarez Polcari came and told us that a government official was waiting to talk to us,” said Vladimir Calderon, president of the Republican Party, one of the opponents locked in the church, in an interview given to the independent press. “But when we opened the door of the church, there were 22 agents of the State Security, who took us by force to the police station, where we were interrogated and humiliated.”

The 13 opponents decided to lock themselves in the church after the pastor refused to deliver their petitions to the Pope, in which they called for freedom for political prisoners, end of repression of regime opponents, freedom of movement and association, economic freedom, freedom to own private property, access to the Internet, higher salaries, and food for children. Paradoxically, their pleas were closely resembling the message brought by the Pope to the island.

It was clear that the dream of establishing a direct contact with the Pope had but little chance of coming true – regardless of the efforts made by opponents, risking their lives to help to built new, democratic foundations in Cuba. Simi-

larly foolish, although slightly less fanciful, would be to expect that anybody would make a public mention of these acts of abuse. How surprising would it be if the Pope made but a brief remark in defence of the people seeking no more than a permission to legitimately and peacefully perform their activities in support of the freedom of opinion, whose expression should be legal even if it is in contradiction with the official dogma, or the right to participate in various political, social and cultural activities.

All this has caused disappointment to a large part of the Cuban population, which has already received one Papal visit before, that of John Paul II., which, however, has not produced any changes in the Cuban reality. “I pinned more hopes on the first visit of the Pope,” said Caridad, a 50-year-old Cuban woman. “Maybe it was because it was the first time in my life I saw something like this. I hoped that it might make some change in our lives. Well, one thing has changed, indeed. Thanks to John Paul II we are again celebrating the Christmas Eve and the Christmas Day. Everything else has remained the same.”

The opinion of the independent press goes along with this. Jose Fornaris, renowned independent journalist, clearly expressed his disappointment over the current situation: “The main responsibility lies with the State, which does not offer any room for free choice and tries to resolve everything by repression. The second culprit is the Church itself, which – and there is no doubt about that – is involved in Politics. Consider, for example, the Mass for the health of President Hugo Chavez, the main ally of the Cuban government, offered in the Havana cathedral. It’s not right to nationalize the Church; the Church must not seek support from the ruling class – it’s duty is to help eradicate evil wherever it occurs.”



The visit of the leading representative of the Vatican has not finished yet and it might be expected that March will turn to one of the worst months in terms of repression, whose means are in clear contradiction with the provisions stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Although I have no intention to downplay the importance of the second visit of the Pope to Cuba, there is a case I feel obliged to mention as it ranks high in the scale of priorities: the case of Rogelio Tavio, human rights activist languishing in the Police Station of the City of Guantanamo as a result of a hunger strike, which he has started in early March in protest against being arbitrarily detained and possibly prosecuted. Will Benedict XVI learn about this terrible case? God help that he will! ←

the church in cuba throughout the history

The Catholic Church in Cuba still seems to be a mirage for almost all the Cubans, in spite of the recent visit of the Pope Benedict XVI.

Before the triumph of the revolution in 1959, it played certain role in civil government and popular philosophy. The Spanish and the conquista, apart from the sword, they brought the cross and in the villas which were founded all over the Island, the town halls and the churches were the first constructions to be erected.

The Indians which Columbus met when discovered Cuba, they did not worship Gods, their cults were focused on dances, rain rituals, the Sun, and the nature. The slaves brought from Africa, they arrived with a solid religious culture. The Yoruba people came with their deity and Orishas, which settled in the Cuban idiosyncrasy. Anyway, the power of the Catholic Church was more effective to dull the rebellion spirit, the scholastics played a dominant paper and it imposed the doctrine of the God on the people.

But with the revolutionary triumph of the January 1st 1959, the new government introduced materialist politics and everything what might sharpen the blades of idealism was damned as profane. Many priests were declared contra-revolutionary, they were imprisoned, persecuted, deported, many churches were closed down and torn down. It was taught that the Pope, as the representative of the God on the Earth, he was delegated for coronation of the kings and thus he legitimated them to oppress the peoples. The Marxists prayed: *The religion is the opium of the people*, it was repeated till tiredness anytime when it was desired to slander the God. The believers had to sign a document where they denied the God, in order to get a job from the government, the only employer. It was also prohibited in

Frank Correa →

the homes to hang an image of Jesus, or an icon with Our Lady of Charity, the patroness of Cuba.

Together with the fall of the socialist camp in the first years of the 1990's decade, it was necessary to permit the religious faith, as opening of an emergency valve. Private selling stands with various images, saints, books with prayers were officially authorized, and the church was resurrected with its masses and baptizing. The Pope John Paul II visited the island in 1998, and he asked Cuba to open towards the World. Anyway, the afro-cuban culture had more acceptance among the people than the catholicism.

In 2012, another Pope visited the island, Benedict XVI. The state prepared a reception at the level of the head of the state. During these days, a strong campaign by the Cuban ecclesiastic authority with a support by the communist government clearly proclaimed its role to guarantee the intentions to show the world the aperture which was asked by John Paul II 13 years ago. The cardinal Jaime Ortega was finally able to access the information media and reach institutional space, such as opening of religious schools and interchange travelling between other churches in other countries, in change for conditional backing of the official politics.

The repression of the opposition was more radical than before. During the stay of Benedict XVI in the island, there were rains of threatens, detentions, sieges, manhunts and blockages of dissidents' mobile phones.

The liturgical activities were broadcasted all over through all the information media towards the population, which barely perceps the existence of Vatican, San Pedro or Holy Grail. The people, the witness of the historical manipulations by the government, before the mass events, did not expect anything positive from the visit of the Pope.

Everything continue the same after the departure of the Supreme Pontiff from the Caribbean island to Rome. The prices continue rising, the salaries remain low, the lack of alimentation and the high living costs hit every day the Cubans. The lacking basic liberties remain closed by barriers and crates. It seems that the Catholic Church cannot do anything, nor wants to do anything to liberate them. ↩



the benediction of the regime

The Pope Benedict XVI visited the island this May, and he also accomplished his pilgrimage of Our Lady of Charity, the patroness of Cuba. But the Pope could not accomplish one of his messages of the supreme representative on the world's church: to take care of the herd, the commandment which the God had given to Abraham as the principal task, the same as the principal task of the Pope.

With the visit of Benedict XVI, the benediction of the Lord was received by only one part of our people. Nevertheless, the close relationship between the Cuban church and the government was blessed. The Cuban church has a defeated position in front of the regime, which guarantees the governors the right to set a renewed sociopolitical model which assures its permanence in power, at least for another decade.

The church, with its head, the cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, after giving the appearance of mediator in the dialogue with Raúl Castro in May 2010, which permitted liberation of 130 political prisoners, it made a 180 degree turn, and made a clear message about its rupture with the opposition, a representation of a part of Cuban civil society. Ortega Alamino has declared that the Cuban opposition does not have clear and universal vision of the nation's future and it follows a dictated agenda from out of the Island.

Our cardinal has also bad memory. He forgets that Fidel Castro persecuted the Catholic Church during a few decades. He also forgets that the opposition has realized straight projects of change and social development under a shrine of democracy for all Cubans and this brought thousands members of opposition to jail during more than 53 years of the dictatorship; the prisons in which they left their lives and, many others, after being condemned, were forced to leave to exile.

Lilvio Fernández Luis →

The Cubans, we have the right to judge the role of the Cuban church and of our cardinal, and also to investigate whether the Pope's visit brought a real sacrament and benedictions to our nation. We know that before, during the visit of the Pope, hundreds of opposition members, the poor ones, and other members of the civil society remained imprisoned for several days in Castro's cells. We also cannot forget the fierce vigilance of all the nation, whose believers and non-believers had to attend compulsorily the masses served by Benedict XVI, under the threat of losing their jobs.

On the other hand, it is evident that we cannot see respect to our religious faith. In the first years of the 60's, it was almost a crime to believe in God, and not in Fidel. Today, with Raúl Castro, it is a crime to attend the mass when you are not a part of the elite or one of his marionettes. Moreover, after the experience with the Pope's visit to Cuba and the position of our Cardinal, there are many Cubans, who guard personally their belief in God and their physical integrity, without pretending to leave the reins of their lives and souls, to be controlled by the church or the government. ←



the pope is not the messiah

Only few events attracted more the world's attention during these days than the Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba. And the thing which was represented to the believers, not believers, and above all the opposition, had a prime place in all information channels.

Among the opposition and in the general population, there appeared some signs of refuse of the Pope's visit, and also many supports. While the popular figures known as *The Group of the 75* such as Martha Beatriz Roque, Guillermo Fariñas, and Vladimiro Roca, among others, were convicted that this pope visit would be a nice place to show the repressions executed by the government against the opposition; others, such as the new leader of the Ladies in White, Bertha Soler, Oswaldo Payá, the leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, and doctor Oscar Alías Bicet, they had an absolute belief in "the catholic church leader will use his prestige and influence to support the Cuban people to conquest its liberty and establish democracy," as the latter declared to the press.

Finally, the so awaited visit of the Pope to Cuba did not leave anybody indifferent; neither the believers, nor the atheists, neither the opposition, nor the government. On the contrary, all the Cubans we can see ourselves affected in one or another form by the Vatican's boss visit.

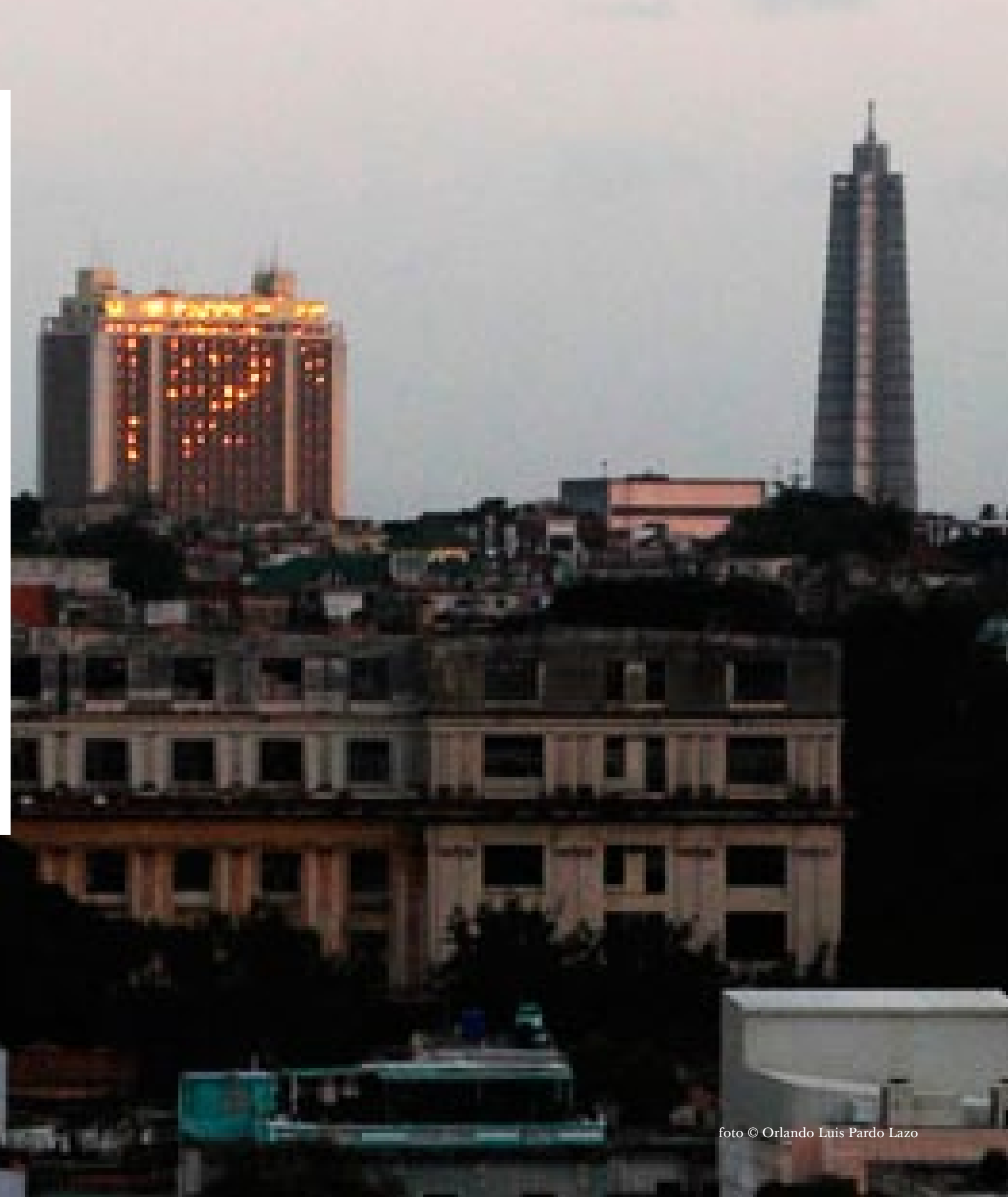
The catholic felt stimulated, filled with hope and blessed by the visit of His Holiness, while many atheists saw in Benedict "the person who provoked a closedown of many business places as well as almost total suspension of transport." The opposition (above all the non-catholic) considers this event only served for detention and evident repression of hundreds of dissidents.

However, the common denominator was the faith of millions of Cubans for which the Pope would intercede before the government, for all the Cubans

Leannes Imbert Acosta →

who suffer such hardship and absolute lack of liberty today. Some even hoped the church leader would reach from the regime liberation of the opposition who remain imprisoned, and a commencement of the real changes in Cuba. Nothing of these has happened; we only remained with some words of courage by the catholic leader; many Cubans feel deception. But, let's think about this: It is sure that the visit of the Supreme Pontiff of the catholic church, or of another religious leader is a good reason to feel stimulated and filled with hope, but it was too illusionary to think the Pope might make disappear the hardship and suffering which this nation has been suffering for more than 50 years. It is something very positive that the opposition would like to pass their petitions to his Holiness, but I think many forgot that our problems and our fights are made in Cuba, and nobody, absolutely nobody, could break for us the chains which keep us.

Let's remember this wise message which John Paul II left for us here during his visit in 1998: "You are not victims" (...) "you are and you have to be the principal agents of your national and personal history." And so, we have to practice to love our fellows, together, and set a "till here" to the repression, pain, and anxiety. Neither the God himself would do it for us, the Cubans, let's be ready to do it ourselves. ↩



children of hatuey

From the historical point of view, Stalinist totalitarian dictatorships have demonstrated their capacity to fall apart on their own. Still, they need to be given some nudges and sometimes even hefty shoves. That's the reason of the emergence of groups of dissidents, peaceful opponents and independent journalists in Cuba, who write about the things that the leaders of Castro's regime hold back and hide. Now, has it ever occurred to you that religions could, through their leaders, join these minorities in the fight for the country's freedom? Has anything like this ever happened?

Cubans, the sons of the Indian chief Hatuey, a brave warrior who caused many problems to Spanish conquistadors, have always loved living in freedom; that's why they keep fighting for it, like their famous Indian ancestor who defended freedom to the death.

Last week, Cuba received a visit by Pope Benedict XVI, the leading representative of the Catholic Church. The atheist dictatorship government (at least supposedly) gave him a warm welcome and appealed to the population with one of the lowest percentage of Catholics in the whole continent to accompany parishioners coming to meet the Supreme Pontiff.

Leaders of the absolute monarchy of the Vatican City have never had much luck with Cuba: neither in the colonial period nor during the democratic government, let alone under the dictatorship of Fidel Castro. I wonder if the ill luck could be attributed to Hatuey, the Indian who preferred dying at the stake to going to the Catholic God's heaven.

Could the same be happening in the rest of the world? Why only 13.9% of the seven billion people living on the planet (a pitiful minority!) adhere to the Catholic Church? Perhaps its because of its dogmas that violate the fundamental human rights instead of keeping pace with the development of human civilization.

Tania Díaz Castro →

Benedict XVI, the 265th Pope, distinguishes himself a great deal from his predecessor, John Paul II. At fourteen he joined (against his will, as he says) the “Hitler Youth” organization, and in 1977 he became the Archbishop of Munich, assuming the responsibility for absolving the German people of the crimes committed by the Nazis. He declared that “...the blame for the horrors fell only on several groups of criminals who abused the nation”. Luckily for him, no one shouted out during his public appearances in Cuba to ask him who was to blame for the crimes committed in the island in the recent decades, or why the Church hasn’t done anything to prevent it.

As I have already said, the Cubans love freedom. Freedom to think, love, reason, move from one place to another or associate, to have or not to have children and to believe or not to believe in the God imposed upon the island last week.

Benedict XVI is not a herald of such freedom. Those who fancy that the Catholic Church, which is opposed to abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and – as a matter of fact – the actual freedom of a man, may change the destiny of Cuba, are no longer children of Hatuey. ←



habemus square

There is only one power. Its architecture is unshakable. Its overwhelming verticality is unbelievable. It cherishes its own crystallized image – an example of pure national narcissism.

Power tends to be pathetically pyramidal in that it points to the sky. An apt comparison, indeed. It also explains a thousand and one cathedrals built to the glory of God as well as the one and only Havana's Revolution Square. A rather cynical parallel. It's been too many decades since the group in power in Cuba has been establishing and re-establishing its power and identifying itself with its abundant despotic ideas. The symbolism also explains the convergence of spaces that has all of a sudden affected our country.

The Revolution missal needs new priests and saints. The dictates of the Catholic Church require at least minimal social discipline. No matter which of the two, it's always the Cuban political police which teaches the grammar to give things a meaning.

Who will be the next to speak to Cuba after Fidel? What will their style of oral demagoguery be like? Is there a way to recreate the myths that illuminate and kill? What words will be used to seize hold of the country? Who is going to update our dictatorial dictionary? How many victims will forge the way towards the grotesque glory for the victors?

In any public gathering in Cuba there is a bit of intrigue and ballet at the same time. No need to worry about emotions – they have been set up in advance, killing any acts of spontaneity whatsoever. It's a role play. A repression game. A gloomy theatre. A terminal one.

The very titles of the Supreme Pontiff and the Supreme Leader sound almost the same. They are like absolute statements. The speakers' platform at the Revolution Square resembles the rostrum of the home temple of the Cuban

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo →

Patroness – the Madonna of Mambisa (a warrior, who, followed by a bunch of outlaws, offered promises in exchange for power). Both of the two podiums serve to softsoap the nation. To exercise the holy craft of reassuring the people that no heresy will stain Cuban history any more. That the barbarism of our citizens (and there has never been anything like this) will be eradicated for good.

In its cunningness, the power knows how wait for its equal. There isn't just one power: there is only the universal power. 🚫



january - may 2012

INTRODUCTION

Government oppression of dissident activities has considerably increased in this period compared with the whole of the last 3 years. Many people are detained for anti-governmental activities when they are by themselves, which suggests that just because they are known dissidents they are arbitrarily arrested without any real reason. Whenever a poster criticizing the regime and calling for the respect of human rights appears in the streets, the police arbitrarily arrests dissidents, even though there are no proof that they had any connection with the posters.

Relative increase in political repression in many provinces against the Ladies in White has been noticed. They were objected to numerous acts of violence and public shame, including cases in which they were forced to undress to be handled by security agents. **Harassment and persecution against the Ladies in White has significantly increased**, compared to last year. They are victims of repudiation acts, threats, kidnapping in plain sight and even confiscation of their white clothes.

The authorities continue with their persecution against the Ladies in White by **impeding the members from leaving their homes**. The authorities lay siege around the dissident's homes using paramilitary brigades who vandalizes the buildings, creating terror among the neighbors, as well as an environment of discrimination and violence.

Unfortunately, the Cuban regime has let another dissident perish in consequence of a hunger strike. **Wilman Villar Mendonza died** in the Clinical and Surgical Hospital Juan Bruno Zayas, **on January 19th, after a 50 day hunger strike** demanding the authorities to revise his case. He was condemned to 4 years imprisonment for crimes he declared himself innocent. Authorities

did not listen to Villar's petitions. About 140 activists were arrested for trying to visit Wilman Villar Mendoza in the hospital or attending his funeral. This death, as well as that of Orlando Tamayo Zapata, **was completely preventable.**

The Pope was rather cautious with his message to Cubans during his visit to the island. He **did not meet with any dissidents.** The visit did not fulfill hopes of those who expected Pope to criticize state of human rights in Cuba. The Church's objective is to gain more space for activities aimed at ordinary Cubans, and a result of the visit there is a possibility for the Church to provide public education. However, this visit will have no effect on improving basic human rights of most Cubans.

Detentions

The majority of dissidents have suffered temporary detentions, ranking from a few hours to a few days, as the most common way of stopping or repressing peaceful dissident activities carried out by the Cuban authorities. **Dissidents are being detained preemptively for hours** just to receive **warnings**, to **prevent them from** attending oppositional activities, mass, traveling, or complaining about fellow dissidents' arrests.

So far this year the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) has recorded **2859 detentions** related to dissident activities.

Detention cases that have shaken Cuba in the beginning of this year:

- Yazmín Conyedo, independent journalist and Lady in White, and her husband, activist Yusmaní Rafael Álvarez, were arrested on January 8th in their home in Santa Clara, right after an act of public repudiation was done in

front of their house. Yazmín is accused of a supposed aggression against a worker of the Communist Party, who on many occasions provoked her and other dissidents, according to testimonies. Many dissidents who demanded their release or declared support to Yazmín and Yusmaní were detained. Even though charges were dropped, they remained detained until April 6th.

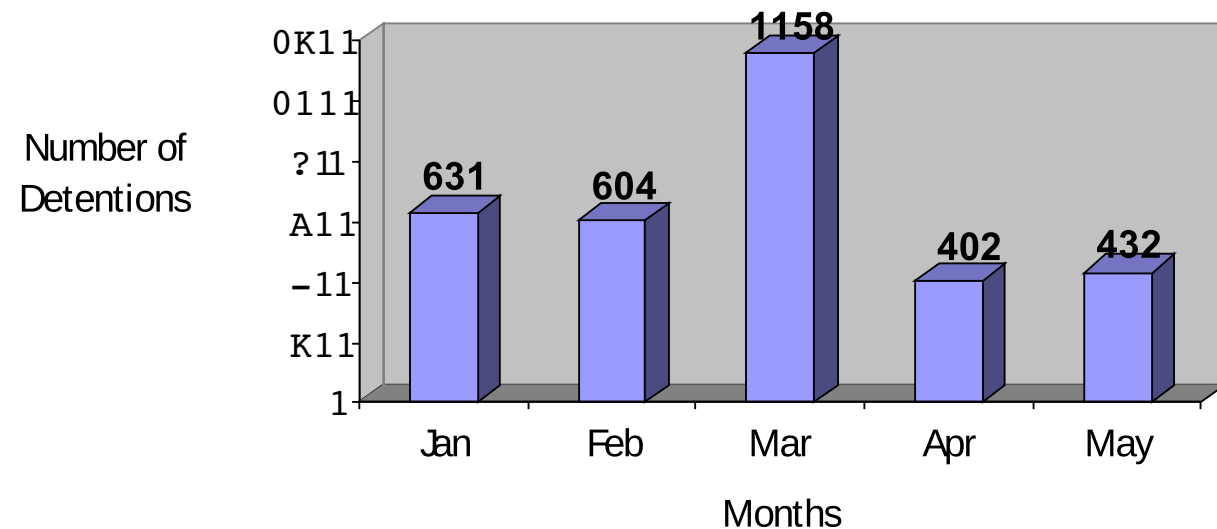
- The detention that was considered by Cuban civil society as the most violent yet this year occurred on February 1st. Iris Tamara Pérez, Idania Yáñez, María del Carmen Martínez, Yanisbel Valido, Damaris Moya, Xiomara Martín and Yaité Diosnelly, from the feminist group Rosa Parks and the Coalición Central Opositora were savagely beaten and taken to Santa Clara police unit after a peaceful demonstration demanding the release of Yazmín Conyedo and Yusmaní Rafael Álvarez. Policemen groped their breasts with an excuse of searching for photographic cameras and cell phones. Afterwards, the dissidents were released in the outskirts of the city.
- More than 100 Ladies in White were arrested in February throughout the whole country. Most of them suffered beatings and public acts of repudiation before their arrest.
- Around 576 people were arrested directly related to the Pope's visit. Most were arrested in order to stop them from protesting or attending the Pope's mass. Many were coerced into house arrest during the visit.
- Hundreds of beggars, homeless and other helpless people were detained and confined in a shelter so they would not be seen by the Pope's commission. Hundreds of people were reported to have died in these shelters during the winter of 2010 of hunger and cold.
- On 2nd April, 43 dissidents were arrested in Santiago de Cuba, including

José Daniel Ferrer García, former prisoner of conscience (group of 75) and his wife Belkis Cantillo (Lady in White). Their house was invaded without any judicial order and then pillaged. The secret police also broke into the home of Raquel Vilanajera Estive and took office materials and equipments, books and other publications and many articles of home use, arresting also other people who were at the houses. Belkis was released on 6th of April, Daniel on the 29th of the same month. Around a week later, Daniel was detained for a day with no given reason.

Mendoza's case, the communist regime freed Ivonne Malleza, Isabel Haydee Álvarez and Ignacio Martínez, detained since November 30th, 2011 for protesting in the Fraternity Park in Havana. They were released shortly after Amnesty International declared them prisoners of conscience.

In February, Rafael Ibarra Roque was released having completed his 20-years sentence. Alfredo Calzado García, Reinaldo Millet Guerrero and Lázaro Marlon Mesa Romero were other prisoners of conscience released in this month, however under parole.

Detentions from January to May



Releases

Very few prisoners of conscience have been released this year, compared to the same period last year.

In order to reduce tensions before international repercussion of Wilman Villar

Imprisonments

Prisoners constantly report that they are obliged to work in camps of forced labor **in exchange for benefits that are theirs by right**. In the over 200 prisons spread around the country, **suicide and self-harm rates** have increased due to the long sentences, bad conditions for the completion of these sentences and the abuse committed unpunished by wardens. In most cases in which wardens are punished for abuse, they carry on with the same work, in the same prisons.

Prisoners were able to smuggle out of Cuba and upload to YouTube hidden-camera **videos made in Combinado del Este** (available at: <http://www.miami-herald.com/2012/03/14/2694164/havana-prison-inmates-complain.html>) a maximum security prison considered to be one of the worst in the country, showing the abject conditions which they are subjected to.

On February 17th, more than 50 prisoners (political and common prisoners) declared themselves on hunger strike in different prisons throughout the country to demand the end of police brutality and repression against civil activists, and claiming for the respect of civil liberties and human rights.

The CCDHRN has documented 4 new prisoners of conscience: Sonia Garro, Ramón Muñoz, Andrés Carrión and Niurka Luque, whom have all been sent to maximum security prisons.

Religion related case of freedom violation

Reutilio Columbie, 41-year-old pastor, continues to suffer from dizziness, intense nausea and vomiting after he was left for dead in early February. The pastor of the Shalom Christian Center, a Pentecostal church in Moa was reportedly attacked by unknown assailants in the early hours of the morning on February 6th and left unconscious on the street. Over two months after the incident, officials have still no suspects in the case.

The pastor was on his way to file a complaint with regional authorities about “arbitrary confiscation of the church vehicle” by authorities in late 2011. Pastor has support from the community, but local authorities “remained intransigent on both the investigation into the attack and the confiscation of the church vehicle.” Local Christians have expressed doubts about the impartiality of the investigation into the attack as authorities may have to identify fellow officials.

JANUARY HIGHLIGHTS

So far in 2012 the government has shown a tendency to increase police violence against peaceful demonstrators, or dissidents that have simply gathered. The CCDHRN reported at least **631 arbitrary detentions** for political reasons during January.

Most arrests were carried out in order to **stop dissidents from participating in peaceful marches, activities in common, attending masses**, requesting the

release of prisoners without condemnation or publicly declaring support to prisoners. After many of the detentions, police released the activists in isolated places of their respective cities.

The paramilitary Brigadas de Respuesta Rápida (Quick-response Brigades), has carried out at least a **dozen acts of public repudiation** against pacific dissidents this month. During the acts, they throw rocks, paint bombs or water with excrements against the houses of activists who try to gather or organize cultural activities. Even criminals are incited to attack on dissidents. After suffering such acts of public repudiation, many dissidents are usually arrested. Another violation of human rights suffered by dozens of Cuban families is the **collapse of buildings**, leaving these families homeless. Buildings collapse due to lack of maintenance by the government, the owner. As a result, dozens of buildings have been abandoned and 5 people have died. Bureaucracy has not allowed Cubans to build or repair their own houses even when the State knows that more than 50 percent of the buildings in the island are in bad conditions.

FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHTS

During February, at least **604 arbitrary detentions** for political reason that lasted between several hours to few days occurred. The number is similar to January’s and December’s.

As an example, 12 **Ladies in White** were **arrested** in February while **on their way to Yoaní Sanchez’s workshop** on civil society and non-violence. Others were forbidden to leave their houses because they were surrounded by an unreasonable number of deployed police forces.

On February 13th, when the Ladies in White tried to pay a tribute to **Laura**

Pollán in what would be her 64th birthday, their headquarters was surrounded by State Security and National Police agents. Traffic was diverted and the street where the headquarters is located was closed to **block anybody from entering the place**. Meanwhile, paramilitaries were screaming insults trying to create panic and diminish the possibility of solidarity acts by neighbors. The same situation happened on February 26th, the second anniversary of Orlando Zapata's death.

MARCH HIGHLIGHTS

During March the CCDHRN registered **1158 arbitrary detentions** for political reasons, the highest number for a month in the last 5 decades, comparable only to the great repressive wave in April 1961, after the invasion of the Bay of Pigs.

More than half of the detentions happened in direct relation to the Pope's visit, and a certain number of extrajudicial house arrests were imposed. Dissidents were forbidden to participate in and watch the Pope's mass.

The Ladies in White saw a continuous crackdown on their activities this month. Members were frequently detained to prevent them from meeting in their headquarters, going to mass, and even attending the Pope's mass. No other dissident group saw as much repression this month as the Ladies in White.

Hundreds of **landlines** and **mobile telephones** of dissidents were **disconnected** by the political police until March 29th, preventing them from reporting on repression to audiences within Cuba as well as the outside world. Many dissidents' mobile phones were **diverted to a centralized line** of the Interior Ministry for the period of Pope's visit.

While the Castro regime banned human rights activists from participating in the recent Papal masses, they **demand other Cubans to attend** by with-

holding pay from those who failed to show written and signed proof of attendance to their employer, in accordance with the Cuban government's Administrative Resolution 234.

APRIL HIGHLIGHTS

During April, 402 people were detained for political reasons, almost three times less than last in March. However, the Cuban government still retains 1st. place in Latin America for these types of abuses.

On April, 2nd in the municipality of El Caney, in Santiago de Cuba **José Daniel Ferrer García**, his wife and other 41 activists from Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU) have been detained after carrying out non-violent protests. José Daniel Ferrer is a former political prisoner from the group of 75 dissidents who had been imprisoned during the »Black Cuban Spring« in March 2003. Ferrer's wife, Belkis Cantillo, said police told her when she visited him in jail on April 16th that they wanted to **charge him with public disorder** for organizing street marches, and receiving outlawed financial aid from the United States.

Following Ferrer's arrest, throughout the month 69 people were **arrested for either inquiring** about his whereabouts or release with the police, or showing public support. One such supporter suffered an act of repudiation on his house after he hanged posters on his walls demanding Ferrer's release. **Dany López de Moya**, arrested on May 18th, was summarily condemned to one and a half years in a **high security prison** for disobedience and resistance after demanding José Daniel Ferrer's release.

During the pacific protests throughout the month, the activists demanded the liberation of **Rogelio Tabio**, who has been on hunger strike for more than

a month now and is currently in a very weak physical condition. The second demand was the liberation of **Andrés Carrion Alvaréz**, the Cuban who screamed ‘*Down with communism!*’ during the Pope’s Mass in Santiago de Cuba. Dissidents also demanded freedom for **Bismark Galan**, detained on April 1st for making a documentary about a young sick girl who does not get any appropriate medical treatment. Galán remains detained without known formal charges in high security prison. Activists protested as well against the violence which the Ladies in White are constantly suffering.

MAY HIGHLIGHTS

During May at least **8 journalists and bloggers** were arrested in order to stop them from traveling around Cuba or from participating in courses and workshops. If they do reach their destination, they are often arrested and deported. Among such people were **José Daniel Ferrer García and Librado Linares García**.

Antonia Rodriguez Mirabal died in may 20th after **paramilitary brigades surrounded** for 2 days the house in which she lived along with her granddaughter Idania Yanes Contreras, leader of the Coalición Central Opositora. **She died of terror from the violence** of the acts, as did Sonia Monteja, who was 74 years old, after such an act was carried against her neighbours, the family Tavío Ramírez.

Many activists of the Observatorio Cubano de los Derechos LGBT (Cuban Observatory of the Rights of LGBT) were **banned from participating** the Conference Against Homophobia, promoted by the Cuban government’s Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX) headed by Mariela Castro, daughter of Raul Castro. Leannes Imbert and Amauri Cabodevilla, among other dissi-

dents were detained for many hours, to actively block their participation. Authorities continued with their plan to **evict from Havana citizens** considered to be residing illegally in the city. In all cases, authorities evicted residents using excessive police force and completely destroying the houses and personal belongings with heavy equipments. ←

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