

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

8 January 2015

Cuba: Prisoner releases must lead to new environment for freedoms

The release of at least nine jailed opposition activists by the Cuban authorities since last night is a positive step which should be followed by a new human rights agenda on the island, Amnesty International said.

Cuban activists have confirmed that five political prisoners were released on Wednesday evening, and at least four more activists were released today (8 January). Among the nine men, three were previously recognized as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International.

It is believed this could be the first in a series of releases of more than 50 prisoners in Cuba as part of a deal announced last month to “normalize” relations between Cuba and the USA.

“The release of these nine prisoners is clearly an important step towards righting past injustices in Cuba, and hopefully the first of many such releases of those jailed for politically motivated offences,” said Erika Guevara Rosas, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

“But we have been receiving incredibly worrying reports about a rise in harassment and short-term detentions of dissidents throughout 2014 which has continued in recent weeks. Prisoner releases will be no more than a smokescreen if they are not accompanied by expanded space for the free and peaceful expression of all opinions and other freedoms in Cuba.”

According to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, 8,899 short-term detentions were documented throughout 2014, compared with 6,424 in the previous year.

Those released on Wednesday include Bianco Vargas Martín and his brother Diango Vargas Martín, Enrique Figuerola Miranda, Ernesto Riveri Gascón and Lázaro Romero Hurtado, all members of the peaceful opposition group Patriotic Union of Cuba (Unión Patriótica de Cuba, UNPACU). Today Emilio Planas Robert, Yohannes Arce Sarmientos, José Manuel Rodríguez Navarro and Yordenis Mendoza Cobas were released.

Amnesty International previously named the twins Bianco Vargas Martín and Diango Vargas Martín, and Emilio Planas Robert as prisoners of conscience and campaigned for their release. Other prisoners of conscience Iván Fernández Depestre and Alexeis Vargas Martín, Bianco and Diango’s eldest brother, remain behind bars. Amnesty International demands their immediate and unconditional release.

The three Vargas Martín brothers were detained in November and December 2012 and were sentenced on public disorder charges to four years imprisonment for Alexeis and two and a half years the twins. Emilio Planas Robert was detained in September 2012 and sentenced to three and a half years for “dangerousness” during a summary trial a month later.

Under the terms of their conditional release, they will still have to report to the Cuban authorities and cannot leave their provinces. Amnesty International believes they should never have been detained in the first place and urge the Cuban authorities to immediately lift these restrictions to their freedom.

“The good will expressed by the Cuban authorities with this series of releases must absolutely translate into the implementation of a new human rights agenda. Respect for freedom of expression, assembly and association must be the next step if the Cuban authorities want to keep their credibility in the face of a world which is watching them,” said Erika Guevara Rosas.

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