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Cuba steps up repression on the eve of the CELAC summit

The Cuban authorities must halt their campaign of repression against opponents and dissidents and allow peaceful activities to take place during the second summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Amnesty International said today.

The meeting will be held on 28 and 29 January in Havana.

“The attitude of the Cuban authorities is an outrageous attack on freedom of expression and assembly which should not go unnoticed by the many leaders now gathering in Havana,” Amnesty International’s Special Advisor for Regional Programmes, Javier Zúñiga, said.

“It is a futile attempt to silence those who speak out about the systematic violation of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and demonstration in Cuba. The government may stop dissidents from getting near the conference but their voices will get through. There is nothing that can silence human rights.”

Last weekend in many parts of the island dozens of dissidents were arbitrarily detained or pressurized not to participate in private events scheduled to run parallel to the summit which begins tomorrow in Havana.

The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN, Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional) has recorded 43 cases of people held for short periods between 23 and 26 January. Another five have been put under house arrest. At least 18 were warned by the authorities not to travel to Havana.

As a result of these arrests and the wave of intimidation, various meetings that were due to be held in parallel to the summit have been cancelled.

Among the activists arrested over the weekend were José Daniel Ferrer García, President of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU, Unión Patriótica de Cuba), and Yusmila Reina Ferrera, a member of the same organization. Both were held for almost 48 hours in different police stations across the country.

José Daniel Ferrer told Amnesty International that he and his colleague were intercepted by men in civilian clothes at about 1pm on 24 January as they were walking to the office of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation.

Ferrer asked them to identify themselves, which they refused to do. They were then pushed into a car and taken to a police station on the boundary between the provinces of Havana and Mayabeque from where they were transferred to separate police stations in Havana where they spent the night.

On 25 January they were taken in the direction of Santiago de Cuba, but they spent the night in a police station in Camagüey. They were eventually released at about midday on 26 January in the province of Santiago de Cuba.

José Daniel Ferrer told Amnesty International that police officers were currently watching his house and it was impossible for him to return to the capital.

“It is an outrage that those who disagree with the Cuban government are unable to say so publicly and collectively. The heads of State from the member countries of CELAC and senior officials from regional and international organizations such as the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, should not overlook the fact that, as they carry on arriving in Havana to participate in the summit, Cuban activists are being clamped down on by their government,” Javier Zúñiga said.

“The leaders of an organization that has full respect for democracy and human rights amongst its principles should speak out in support of freedom of expression and assembly for Cuba citizens,” he added.

The arrest and coercion of dissidents and opponents is a tactic routinely used by the Cuban authorities. During 2013, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation reported 6,424 arrests of government critics. In December 2013 alone there were 1,123 arbitrary arrests on “political grounds”, the highest monthly figure since the visit of Pope Benedict XVI in March 2012.

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