

Amnesty International

Cuba 2012 Annual Report

Head of state and government

Raúl Castro Ruz

Death penalty

retentionist

Population

11.3 million

Life expectancy

79.1 years

Under-5 mortality

5.8 per 1,000

Adult literacy

99.8 per cent

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The last 11 prisoners of conscience detained during the March 2003 crackdown were released in March, along with 62 other political prisoners. However, government repression continued, resulting in hundreds of short-term arrests and detentions. Journalists and political dissidents faced harassment and intimidation by security officials and government supporters acting with government acquiescence.

Background

The Cuban authorities continued to stifle freedom of expression, association and assembly, in spite of the much publicized releases of prominent dissidents. Hundreds of pro-democracy activists and dissidents suffered harassment, intimidation and arbitrary arrest.

In April, the Cuban Communist Party held its first congress since 1997 and adopted a package of more than 300 economic reforms that were due to be introduced gradually. However, no resolutions were adopted granting Cubans greater enjoyment of civil and political rights or proposing legislative reforms to allow greater political freedom on the island. During the year, the Cuban government introduced minor economic reforms authorizing the sale of cars and houses, and permitting some income-generating activities outside its direct control.

Alan Gross, a US citizen arrested in December 2009 for distributing telecommunications material in Cuba, was sentenced by a Cuban tribunal to 15 years in prison for crimes against the security of the state. US officials and personalities attempted to secure his release on humanitarian grounds but were unsuccessful.

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Freedom of expression, assembly and association

The authorities continued to severely restrict the freedom of expression, assembly, and association of political dissidents, journalists and human rights activists. They were subjected to arbitrary house arrest and other restrictions on their movements by the authorities and government supporters which prevented

them from carrying out legitimate and peaceful activities. All media remained under the control of the Cuban government.

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Repression of dissent

In February, the authorities detained more than 100 people in a single day and placed over 50 people under house arrest in a pre-emptive strike designed to stop activists marking the death of activist Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died in 2010 following a prolonged hunger strike while in detention.

- Reina Luisa Tamayo, Orlando Zapata's mother; her husband, José Ortiz; and Daniel Mesa, a human rights activist, were arrested on 22 February by about 15 state security agents as they left their home in Banes, Holguín province. The arrests were intended to prevent them from undertaking any activities in memory of Orlando Zapata on the first anniversary of his death on 23 February. All three were released 12 hours later. In June, Reina Luisa Tamayo went into exile in the USA with her family.

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Prisoners of conscience

In March, the Cuban authorities completed the release of the prisoners of conscience detained during the March 2003 crackdown, as well as political prisoners, some of whom had been imprisoned since the 1990s. The release of the last 52 prisoners of conscience started in July 2010 following an agreement with the Spanish government and dialogue with the Catholic Church. Most of the former prisoners and their relatives were forced into exile and only a few were allowed to remain in Cuba.

- Nestor Rodríguez Lobaina, president and co-founder of the Cuban Youth Movement for Democracy, was forced into exile in Spain; he was a prisoner of conscience. He had been arrested in December 2010 and spent four months in detention without trial in connection with a meeting he organized at his home and anti-government banners he displayed outside his home in August 2010. Nestor Rodríguez Lobaina had served a six-year prison term between 2000 and 2005 for contempt for the authorities.

Arbitrary detention

The authorities continued to use arbitrary detention in an attempt to silence critics of government policy.

- The Ladies in White, relatives of former prisoners of conscience from the 2003 crackdown, and their supporters repeatedly faced arbitrary arrest and physical attacks as they staged protests in several towns in Cuba. In August, five Ladies in White living in the city of Santiago de Cuba were arrested before they could reach the cathedral from where they planned to begin their march. Nineteen members of the group were rearrested a few days later and 49 Ladies in White and their supporters were prevented from carrying out a protest in central Havana in support of their members in Santiago de Cuba and other eastern provinces. On several occasions, the Ladies in White reported that they were subjected to physical and verbal aggression from government supporters during peaceful marches. In October, 26 members of the Ladies in White were briefly detained by the authorities to prevent them from participating in a meeting following the death of their leader Laura Pollán in October. In July, more than 20 members of the Support Group of the Ladies in White were detained the day before a march called by the Ladies in White at Our Lady of the Rosary Church in Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba province. Dissidents on their way to the church were also detained and prevented from taking part in the peaceful march.

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The US embargo against Cuba

In January, the US government announced minor changes to the embargo, allowing greater travel to Cuba for educational, cultural, religious and journalistic activities. In October, for the 20th consecutive year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on the USA to lift its economic and trade embargo against Cuba, in place since 1961.

UN agencies working in Cuba, such as the WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA, continued to report the negative effects of the US embargo on the health of the population, particularly members of marginalized groups. Access to specific commodities, equipment, medicines and laboratory materials remained scarce as a result of restrictions imposed on the importation of items manufactured by US companies and their subsidiaries or produced under US patents.