

Cuba:

Europe-Cuba NGO Network Calls for Increased Focus on Human Rights and Democracy by EU Institutions

March 18, 2010

Today, on the seventh anniversary of Cuba's „Black Spring” the Europe-Cuba NGO Network calls on all EU Institutions to increase their attention to issues of human rights and democracy on the island and to utilize all appropriate measures to support Cuban civil society efforts aimed at expanding the rights and freedoms of ordinary Cubans.

Seven years ago, on March 18, 2003, the Cuban government moved swiftly and ruthlessly to crush political dissent and activism on the island. The two-day crackdown that has become widely known as the Black Spring resulted in the imprisonment of 75 dissidents, among them journalists, labour activists, independent librarians, and writers. Those arrested received long prison sentences, some up to 28 years. Today, 53 of them remain imprisoned and in total over 200 people are in prison for political reasons, despite repeated calls for their release by the international community.

Cuba's human rights situation has not improved in any discernable way since 2003. People are still harassed, persecuted, and often jailed for voicing their dissent and ordinary Cubans still do not enjoy even the limited freedoms accorded to them under their own Constitution. While Cuba signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) to great fanfare in 2008, both treaties are yet to be ratified by the Cuban parliament.

As a recent report by Human Rights Watch has noted: “Rather than dismantle the state's repressive machinery, Raúl Castro has kept it firmly in place and fully active. Scores of political prisoners arrested under Fidel Castro continue to languish in Cuba's prisons. And Raúl Castro's government has used draconian laws and sham trials to incarcerate scores more who have dared to exercise their fundamental freedoms.”

Yet despite the unyielding repression of the regime, last year the EU decided to lift the measures that it imposed in the wake of the “Black Spring” crackdown, hoping that such a gesture of goodwill could pave the way for a constructive dialogue with the Cuban government. However, these hopes have been dashed: Cuba continues to show complete disregard for calls by the international community to improve its human rights record – and specifically to release all political prisoners – and has repeatedly refused to substantially address such concerns during discussions with EU representatives under the EU-Cuba political dialogue process.

Less than a year after the EU's decision on June 23rd 2008 to lift the diplomatic sanctions adopted in 2003, well-known dissident Dársi Ferrer was arrested by Cuban police and has been held since without charges, despite repeated calls by diplomats for his release. Another lamentable example for the Cuban government's brutal treatment of political dissidents is the recent death of Orlando Zapato Tamayo, one of the 75 political prisoners of the Black Cuban Spring. Orlando died after an 80-day hunger strike, protesting the inhumane conditions of his incarceration.

It is clear that the Cuban government doesn't feel in any way obligated by the process of political dialogue with the EU to improve its treatment of political dissidents and civil society activists. The hoped-for leverage from engagement advocated by some EU member states sadly has not materialized.

In 2010, under the Spanish EU presidency, it is likely that the EU's relationship with Cuba will receive added attention. This should not lead to further appeasement of the Cuban government by the EU. Rather, it must be ensured that this attention adequately serves the interest of the Cuban people, not solely that of the regime, which is keen to improve its relationship with the EU without making any concession regarding its repressive tactics to muzzle opponents and activists.

Specifically, we strongly urge the European Union Delegation in Havana to upgrade its contacts with human rights defenders and to find practical ways to coordinate regular monitoring of political prisoners in critical health conditions, establish regular contacts with Damas de Blanco, and to provide humanitarian help to families of political prisoners outside of Havana

While engaging in dialogue with the Cuban government, the EU must remain true to its basic values and must do everything in its power to press for the release of political prisoners and to support independent civil society, both politically and materially.

In this respect, the European Parliament's resolution on March 11 is a welcome sign of increased willingness to hold the Cuban regime to account on its systematic and grave violations of human and political rights. The Europe-Cuba NGO Network strongly supports the call by the European Parliament to the Council and the Commission to step up their actions to demand the release of political prisoners and safeguard the work of human rights defenders and to give their unconditional support and full encouragement to the launching of a peaceful process of political transition to multi-party democracy in Cuba.

The Europe-Cuba NGO network encourages the Parliament to continue to play a constructive and leading role in focusing attention on the plight of political activists and dissidents in Cuba. The Europe-Cuba NGO network also calls on the Parliament to actively press the European Commission to increase the amount of resources dedicated to support activists in their struggle to improve the state of human and political rights in Cuba.

More specifically, the network strongly supports the recent suggestion by Heidi Hautala, Chair of the European Parliament's Human Rights Subcommittee, to establish an all-party working group on Cuba within the European Parliament. We are convinced that such a working group, consisting of MEPs from all parliamentary groups, should play a vital role in the future development of the EU – Cuba policy, ensuring that it is aligned with the basic values of democracy and human rights and that it delivers real and tangible benefits to ordinary Cubans. The network would be keen to lend its resources to such a working group and assist its efforts to provide more accurate information on the current state of human rights and democracy on the island and to advise on ways that EU could become more effective in contributing to their improvement.

This statement has been endorsed by the following organisations:

People in Need, Czech Republic
 Freedom House Europe, Hungary
 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, United Kingdom and Belgium
 Christian Democratic International Centre, Sweden
 Nadacia Pontis/Pontis Foundation, Slovakia
 Freedom and Democracy Foundation, Poland
 Solidaridad Espanola Con Cuba, Spain
 Fundación Hispano Cubana, Spain
 Unitas Foundation, Estonia,
 International Society for Human Rights, Germany
 Cuba Futuro, Netherlands

