

CON VOZ ABIERTA

Colección de noticias escritas por periodistas independientes en Cuba

(Septiembre 2012 a julio 2013)

WITH OPEN VOICES

Collection of News Stories Written by Independent Journalists in Cuba

(September 2012 to July 2013)

Prólogo de / Foreword by

Yoani Sánchez

INSTITUTE FOR
WAR & PEACE REPORTING









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**INSTITUTE FOR
WAR & PEACE REPORTING**



The Institute for War and Peace Reporting builds peace and democracy through free and fair media. Programmes include reporting, training and institutional capacity building projects for local media in areas of crisis and conflict.

El Instituto para la Paz y la Democracia construye la paz y la democracia a través de medios de comunicación libres y justos. Los programas incluyen la cobertura noticiosa, capacitación y proyectos de desarrollo de capacidades institucionales para los medios de comunicación locales en las zonas de crisis y de conflicto.

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Soy cubano, soy

Popular

CERRADO

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Diario de Cuba

Cubanet

Martí Noticias

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IWPR in Cuba

GIVING VOICE, DRIVING CHANGE

A visit to Cuba pulls the heartstrings. A Caribbean island, it boasts enticing shorelines and lush valleys. Its undisturbed – if crumbling – architecture evokes earlier times and different rhythms of life, as do the wonderfully maintained old cars. The exuberance of the people – and the inevitable mojitos and cigars – are infectious. Above it all wafts the music of soul and heat.

But the deprivation within such a paradise also takes your breath away – symbolized as much as anything by the tin-shack dwellings so prone to collapse during the storm season. Cuba does not fall far behind Bulgaria in the UN's human development index, and stands well above many Balkan, Middle East and other countries. But standing in the cross winds of Cold War politics and Atlantic hurricanes has taken a severe strain on the population, with little reprieve in sight.

Most heart-wrenching of all for such an energetic and enquiring people is the isolation. In an age of global instant connectivity, the people of Cuba remain cut off – with scant access to the internet, international mobile communications and the world of information and exchange that it provides. While the number of journalists in prison has reduced, many people remain jailed, including short-term detention, merely for thinking differently.

When the reality of this isolation hits, the charm of the old world style – not to mention the ubiquitous revolutionary slogans – fades.

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting helps give people voice in the most challenging of environments so that information can be shared and concerns can be heard. The organization takes no political position and we do not seek or

support political change. But we do hold fast to core values of human rights and dignity, and we believe that the foundation of this is people's right to express themselves.

In a world of social media and blogging, we also believe that the gathering and presentation of information is a responsibility too, as well as a skill. This critical task of sifting (that is, editorial judgment) has an essential role to play in achieving impact. Whether a professional reporter, citizen journalist or rights activist, how you communicate can make as much difference as what – and this is especially the case in difficult settings. IWPR's role is to help people do that better, through the craft and values of journalism, and the coal-face work of training, mentoring and editing for clarity and accuracy. Words can be dangerous, so best use them well.

The network of Cuban journalists and citizen reporters represented in this book are joined not just to each other, but to similar networks IWPR supports in more than three dozen countries around the world, from Eurasia and the Middle East to Asia and Africa.

From frontline conflict zones to dictatorships, transitional societies to developing countries, all of them share the simple desire to say what they see, and we are proud to help them exercise this most essential human right.

Anthony Borden

IWPR, Executive Director

Foreword

INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM: THE VOICE THAT AWAKENS US

A few years ago, I read a text by a noted Chinese writer about an imaginary iron house, with no doors or windows and virtually indestructible, and with several sleeping people shut inside it. With no chance of escape, they would die of suffocation, passing from drowsiness to death without being aware of their agony or of the terrible position they were in. Observers outside the house debated whether they should strike the metal walls to awaken the captives, or – more mercifully – to refrain from doing so, given that the chances of escaping from the hermetically-sealed prison were slim, and that those inside would endure suffering and despair once they realized where they were. But it was also the case that if at least one among them did wake up, there would be hope that the house of iron could be destroyed and they could find a way out.

Independent journalism in Cuba has become one of the blows struck against the other side of the iron wall to wake us up. Information drags us out of the lethargy and ignorance to which the official press subjects us. The reporters who risk their lives and freedom every day do not just focus on problems; they also help us find solutions to the enormous challenges facing Cuba today.

Many independent journalists never graduated from university or completed a challenging course in public communications, yet as responsible citizens they have set themselves the task of documenting and revealing what is happening around them.

They have shown us that we should no longer wait for the person who sleeps more lightly, who has a diploma or practices journalism in the official media, to come out of his slumber and guide us to the exit. Now, all of us want to – and are able to – take part in breaking out of the confines created by the ideological monopoly over the truth. That is true citizen journalism.

This book is a collection of articles by people whose goal is precisely to strike at the dense wall of disinformation and apathy; people

whose work is to create awareness among their fellow-Cubans and the rest of the world about what is happening in their country.

The job is both satisfying and thankless. Roberto Guerra, Odelín Alfonso, Laura Paz, Calixto Ramón Martínez, Carlos Ríos Otero and many of the others whose work is brought together in these pages are exceptional in that they have been both inside and outside the iron house. They are the ones who awoke and found the exit. They combine both figures in the metaphor – the person knocking frantically against the metal from the outside, and the one who opens his eyes and discovers he is trapped inside, where repression and total control of the media have made it possible to imprison our nation.

These journalists have managed to overcome all forms of confinement and danger. They were born and grew up in a country where an ideological monopoly of the press has made opinions and independent journalism tantamount to treason. Illegal arrests, beatings, prison and constant social stigmatization are only some of the wide range of abuses suffered by independent journalists in Cuba.

The Black Spring of 2003 showed just how much the work of these independent reporters unsettled Fidel Castro's government. Those imprisoned in the fateful days of March 2003 included many who had been or were serving as reporters on silenced truths. The authorities used the judicial process to try to stop the growing phenomenon of journalists who behaved like free individuals. Law 88, known as the "gagging law", was employed to hand down long jail sentences to dissidents. The State Security service believed this would silence citizens' voices, but it was wrong.

Ten years after the Black Spring, independent journalists have managed to open up a crack in the wall and allow a breath of air to reach a sleeping population. Some have shown perseverance, others bravery, and all have acted with responsibility. Through a text, an image or the work of a whole lifetime, they have demonstrated that the pain of knowing is preferable to not knowing. It is worth the agony of being aware of the limits and being on the alert for danger, because only then, when we are conscious of our problems, can we wake up and face them.

Yoani Sánchez

Havana, August 2013

Blogger (Generación Y) and regional vicepresident for Cuba
of the Inter American Press Association

INTRODUCTION

To support independent voices in Cuban journalism, the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, working with the Czech organization People in Need, launched an innovative training program in early 2012.

The training is designed to meet the needs of up-and-coming reporters. A mix of training workshops, followed up by feedback and mentoring provided remotely, proved effective in familiarizing the participants with international best practice in journalism, equipping them to provide objective information about developments in their country as an alternative to state media output.

The work was not without its challenges and risks – at least 12 of the participating journalists were detained over this period, and foreign trainers were detained and harassed by Cuban police on two occasions.

The articles reproduced in this book are divided into three sections. The first, *State of Suspicion: Justice, Politics and Human Rights* brings together journalistic work carried out in a climate of political persecution and restriction of basic freedoms. In this context the Cuban journalists should seek balanced information, consult official and independent sources and generate journalism based on facts, fulfilling international standards, such as impartiality. Challenges that they are gradually overcoming.

The second section *Day by Day: Cuba's Social Contract* penetrates deep into the fabric of the island's society; each article is a reflection of daily events. The stories unravel and reveal the distinct realities in Cuba's cultural mosaic and Cuban's ingenious methods to survive day-to-day life.

The last section, *Finding the Way: Between State Supply and True Demand* allows readers to explore the process of “updating the economic model” in Cuba and identify its impact on Cuban society and peoples’ constant attempts to adapt to change. “Nothing is easy,” “Everything is possible” are the phrases that Cubans often use to describe their reality.

The articles do not pretend to offer a complete oversight of events from September 2012 to July 2013, and instead offer glimpses into the lives and experiences of Cubans, seen through Cuban eyes.

This book concludes with four testimonials by participants in the journalism course and a Code of Ethics for Cuban Journalists. This last document is the result of a process of analysis and reflection facilitated by IWPR, incorporating proposals by the Cuban Association for Freedom of Press and the independent news agencies Hablemos Press (CIHPRESS) and Jagua Press, as well as legal advice from Cubalex, on how a journalist should exercise their profession. The code of ethics “promotes freedom of expression... and encourages free, uncensored and responsible journalism.”

As much as anything, the contents of this book attest to the courage and tenacity of the 50-plus journalists who enrolled in and completed the training program. As one of them put it, “Despite the risks, I want to be a journalist because it helps give people direction, encourages dialogue among all the different groups that make up our society, and above all because it sheds light on negative things so that they can be improved.” •



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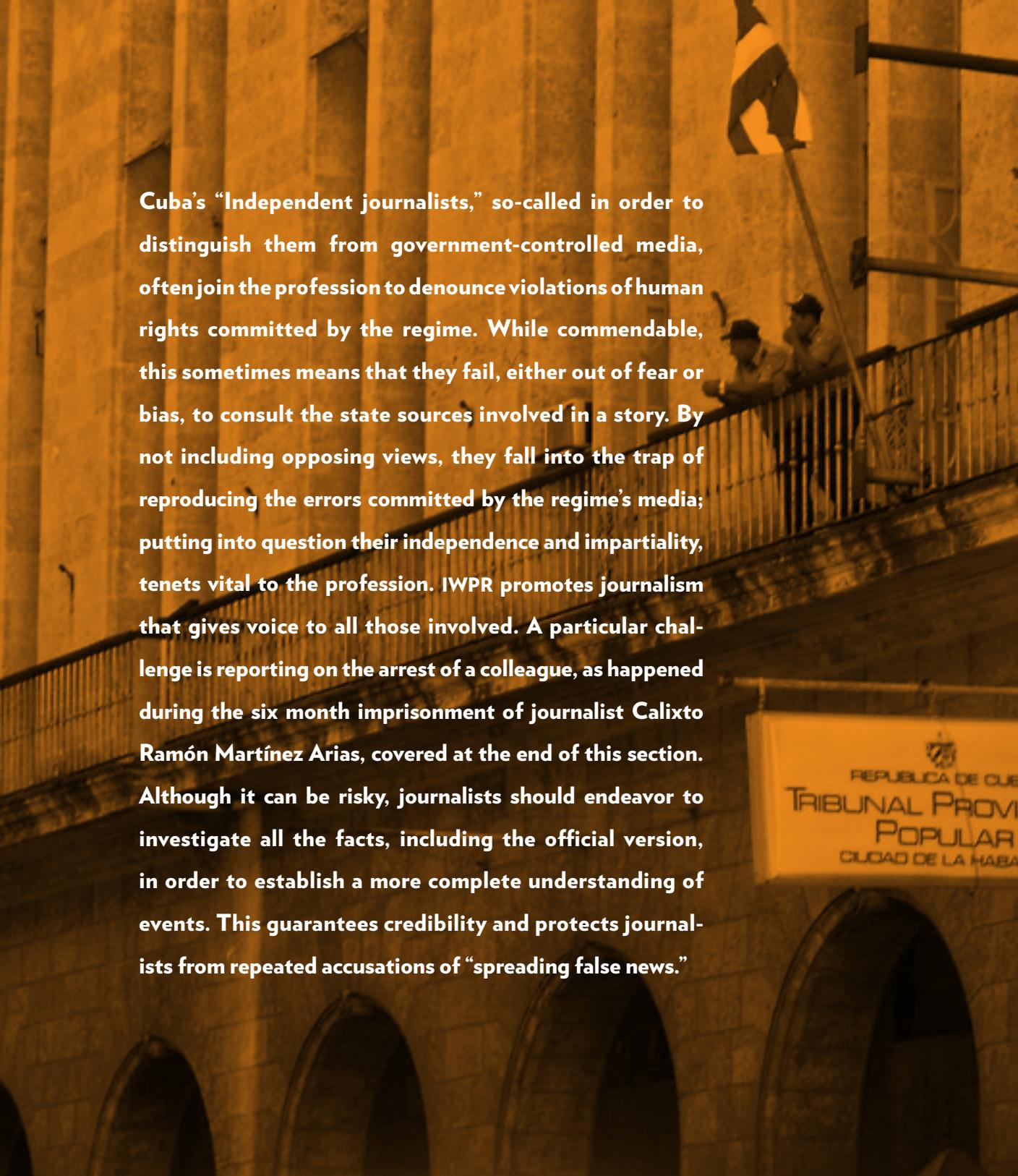


ESTADO DE SOSPECHA

Justicia, política y derechos humanos

STATE OF SUSPICION

Justice, Politics and Human Rights



Cuba's "Independent journalists," so-called in order to distinguish them from government-controlled media, often join the profession to denounce violations of human rights committed by the regime. While commendable, this sometimes means that they fail, either out of fear or bias, to consult the state sources involved in a story. By not including opposing views, they fall into the trap of reproducing the errors committed by the regime's media; putting into question their independence and impartiality, tenets vital to the profession. IWPR promotes journalism that gives voice to all those involved. A particular challenge is reporting on the arrest of a colleague, as happened during the six month imprisonment of journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, covered at the end of this section. Although it can be risky, journalists should endeavor to investigate all the facts, including the official version, in order to establish a more complete understanding of events. This guarantees credibility and protects journalists from repeated accusations of "spreading false news."

CUBAN JOURNALIST'S MISSION TO TELL THE TRUTH

Interview with Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez before his September 11 detention.

Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, an independent journalist in Cuba and founder of the Hablemos Press news agency, was released on September 12, after being detained, held for more than a day and badly beaten.

After Guerra Pérez, 33, was detained outside his house in the Cuban capital Havana on September 11, his wife Magaly Norvis Ortero tweeted, “I have been informed that Roberto was beaten so savagely at the moment of his arrest that he was left unconscious.”

Guerra Pérez was released after spending over 28 hours in custody. He said officers beat him till he was close to unconsciousness and made death threats to get him to stop his independent reporting.

The day before his detention he knew he was in trouble, writing, “I’ve had a lot of problems in the past 12 hours. The political police have threatened Magaly and I, saying they would flatten our house because of the information I have been sending out via Twitter.”

Guerra Pérez’s sister Sandra said, “I will blame the Cuban government for anything that happens to my brother.”

Guerra Pérez played a key role among the social media activists who kept Cubans informed via Twitter during a massive electricity outage in the country on September 9. Virtually no information about the blackout was broadcast by state-run media, as the government appeared keen to play down its scale. The BBC reported that the blackout probably affected between six to seven million people for over four hours.

In an interview conducted by email two weeks before his detention, Guerra Pérez spoke about his life as an independent journalist in Cuba.

“I have served almost four years in prison, on three convictions, for practicing independent journalism and for being a defender of human rights,” he said. “Since 2003, I have been detained over 120 times and I have been beaten in the street, at police stations and in prisons. When I was arrested in 2005, I served 22 months in prison, 600 kilometers away from my family. Six months and 20 days of this were spent in a torture center where I could barely see the light of day.”

Dana Sants
September 13, 2012

"For me it was, and always will be, a matter of pride to be a political prisoner. But captivity is something horrible, a horror... worse than anything you might have seen in the movie 'Saw'."

Guerra, whose health is still badly affected by imprisonments and his numerous hunger strikes, was keen to explain his motives for practicing journalism and running an independent press agency, despite the risks involved.

"On the island, we know that all the media is state-owned... mouthpieces for the Communist Party, whose journalists write what they are told to. The newspapers are toilet paper for thousands of Cubans," he stated.

"I am young, I have a visa for the United States and Germany. I could go and see the world, work, have my own house, a car, a plate of good food and earn a lot of money. Yet here I am working grueling hours under constant repression," he said.

"I decided to [become a journalist] because I enjoy reporting everything that's happening in Cuba and the press does not disclose. Revealing the truth concealed behind the propaganda."

He continued, "I love it; it's something I couldn't stop doing even if I wanted to... the positive thing is that you don't tell lies, you tell the truth to your readers. I would really like to do more for my country, which lives under a dictatorship."

"I want freedom for my people. I love this land... My greatest desire is to keep my project alive, if I live to see it through to the end."

Guerra Pérez acknowledges that the 1959 Cuban revolution delivered some positive changes to the country. "Everyone has been able to learn how to read and write, to study and our children can go to school every day," he said.

However, he remains highly critical of most aspects of the system.

"It is very difficult in general. Cubans live in completely squalid conditions. We enjoy no freedoms... We mistrust one another, because the government has degraded us all to the point where each of us thinks everyone else has a policeman inside them," he said. "We have no right to travel, to go to the beach with foreign friends... We have no right to think freely and if we do, we risk going to jail. We cannot organize public meetings or peaceful rallies... We live as prisoners within

"My greatest desire is to keep my project alive, if I live to see it through to the end."

our own island, surrounded by water where it is illegal to fish. Our children cannot study what they want and we cannot choose a piece of land on which to build a house of our own. We live amid overcrowding in our apartments. Life in Cuba today is one of great suffering.”

Guerra is a self-taught journalist from a deprived background. “I am the son of a poor peasant family.... When I was four, my mother left my father. We became gypsies, initially living in Sierra Maestra in a place called Las Delicias where I had to walk about four kilometers through the jungle to school every day.”

“At the age of nine, I had to run errands for my neighbors, sell homemade sweets and take any opportunity that came up to make money to feed my mum and younger brother... I had to stop studying when I was 14 because we were so poor. Three years later. I caught up and finished 12th grade,” he said.

“What not many people know is that for part of my life, around 1992, I lived on a landfill located in Los Ranchos, Camagüey. My family and I ate whatever the trucks dumped on the site, since it was the time of the ‘special period’ [period of particular hardship caused by the collapse of Cuba’s ally, the Soviet Union]. It wasn’t only us; lots of people did that.”

“I am not a journalism graduate. I taught myself to write from the beginning without any academic training. I edit videos, audio, prepare photos – all skills I acquired from my interest in exposing what happens on the island.... I’m self-taught.”

Guerra decided to become a journalist in early 2004 when Julio Machado of Radio Martí, the United States-based Cuban radio station, interviewed him about Sierra Maestra. He denounced the poverty in the region, and the radio program proved very popular. Machado later told Guerra that he had a “talent for reporting, and that he would help me. Those were my first steps as an independent journalist.”

Guerra went on to describe his normal working day.

“I work in extremely cramped conditions in a tiny office in my home that is only 1.6 meters high, in extreme temperatures. Sometimes we squeeze in up to six people working on three computers. We’re constantly under pressure from the amount of information we receive, and we can’t publish it immediately on the web because we don’t have internet,” he said. “It’s now 2:35 in the morning and I haven’t slept at all. Last night I only slept three hours, and less than that the night before last.”



*Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez.
Photo: Hablemos Press*

"I probably won't sleep at all today, because after this interview I have to check the news and my colleagues' work in order to publish them early, using the two hours of internet that an embassy allocates to me."

According to the news website Diario de Cuba, Guerra was detained on September 11 while on his way to the Czech embassy to publish news reports on the Hablemos Press blog.

Guerra ended the interview by saying, "I would like to see my people freed from dictatorship; to be able to spit on the graves of those who took away our freedom; to create a television channel where everyone can shout out their opinions; to be able to put up a stage in every park where people can say what they want without being harmed or imprisoned."

"I would like all rights to be respected, and citizens of this country to live in a democracy. Those are some of my dreams for the future." •

*The team at Centro de Información
Hablemos Press headquarters.
Photo: Hablemos Press*



Dana Sants is the pseudonym of a freelance reporter in Mexico.

CUBAN COURT FINES MAN FOR ACT OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE¹

Prosecutors in Cienfuegos wanted jail term for defendant who blocked road to stop pollution from cement company trucks.

A military tribunal in the Cuban city of Cienfuegos has fined a local man for blocking a road with rocks to stop trucks from a nearby cement plant driving past his home and kicking up clouds of dust.

In a one-day trial on June 25, judges found Elio Rojas Sabina guilty of defying authority and resisting the police, but rejected a prosecution request for a two-year jail term. Instead, they imposed a fine of 600 pesos, about 25 US dollars, more than the average monthly wage in Cuba.

At about nine in the evening of February 3 this year, Rojas Sabina returned to his home in the rural community of Guabairo, 20 kilometers from Cienfuegos, after finishing his bartending shift at the local social club. He found his 12-year-old daughter Alina Rojas Días in bed with a fever brought on by a throat infection, which the village doctor said was caused by dust from the production process at the Karl Marx Cement Plant.

Rojas Sabina could see how freight trucks from the plant churned up dust from the road, which the wind then blew directly into his house.

"I just had to do something to stop it," Rojas Sabina said. He decided to "put large rocks in the road to make the vehicles slow down and at least alleviate some of the problem... with the job done, I went home to bed."

According to local doctors, the thick clouds of dust from the trucks, as well as the powdered rock used in making cement, cause respiratory complaints and skin conditions among residents of the area.

That same evening, Eutelio Álvarez Domínguez, the local government chief for the area, reported the road block to the National Revolutionary Police's Municipal Police Unit.

Rojas Sabina's wife Marisol Sabina Mendoza said they were woken by Area Police Chief Roberto Bragado Acosta, who told her husband to clear the road because vehicles were unable to get through.

"He rudely demanded that Elio [Rojas Sabina] remove the rocks. My husband refused and then [Bragado] went off, promising he'd be back with reinforcements," she said.

Alejandro Tur Valladares

September 13, 2012

1. Parts of this article were also published on Cuban news site www.cubanet.org

Later that night, two police officers detained Rojas Sabina with Álvarez Domínguez's assistance.

Clemente Álvarez Díaz, a local resident, says he saw four people, including police officers, enter Rojas Sabina's house that night, forcing the door open with a kick. Álvarez Díaz says they attacked his neighbor in a "violent and unjustifiable" manner, throwing him to the floor and handcuffing him in front of his daughter. He was only half-dressed when they took him into custody at the Municipal Police Unit.

Throughout the legal process, police have maintained that the detainee resisted arrest so they had to use force. Rojas Sabina himself says he was forcibly removed from his home and beaten for no reason.

The trial opened at nine in the morning of June 25 with testimony from the prosecution witnesses, the police officers involved in the arrest. After a rigorous cross-examination of the officers, the defense lawyer pointed out contradictions which he said called into question the veracity of their testimonies.



*Elio Rojas Sabina, shortly
after his arrest.
Photo: Alejandro Tur Valladares*

Judges decided to hear only one testimony for the defense case, that of Rojas Sabina's wife Marisol, and rejected other evidence which the defense lawyer regarded as vitally important, such as photos that he said showed injuries sustained by his client during the arrest. These injuries were not mentioned in the case documents which the prosecution submitted to the court.

At three in the afternoon, the judges returned from their deliberations and declared Rojas Sabina guilty of the charges against him, while replacing the prison sentence requested by prosecutors with a 600 Cuban peso fine payable in 200 installments of three pesos.

The cement plant was launched in 1980 close to Guabairo. At the time, the government promised residents new houses outside the area to guarantee their health and safety. That promise was not delivered on, and the village has since expanded so that houses on the edge are only ten meters from the plant.

The provincial assembly awarded Cementos Cienfuegos the Quality Prize 2011 for its plant at Guabairo. The company's official website says the prize was in recognition of its excellence in areas including "savings on energy consumption and reduction of pollution." •



Dust cloud caused by passing trucks in Guabairo.

Photo: Alejandro Tur Valladares

Alejandro Tur Valladares is an independent journalist in Cuba.

CUBA'S NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEES LOSE IMPETUS

Nearly everyone is part of the communal surveillance network, but members admit that people don't turn up for events any more.

As Cuba's system of neighborhood committees celebrated its 52nd birthday, observers said public participation was dwindling.

National celebrations of the anniversary of the nationwide Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, CDR, took place in Cienfuegos province in late September, for the fourth year running.

The CDR system was set up in 1960, a year after the Cuban revolution, as a network of neighborhood groups which would spy on residents and stamp out any subversive activity.

As well as acting as the regime's eyes and ears, CDRs coordinate community activities. In the last few years, they have also become involved in health and hygiene campaigns.

Most Cubans formally register as members of their local CDR – official statistics show that 93 per cent of people over the age of 14 are in the organization.

Officials from the CDR National Directorate said they chose Cienfuegos to host this year's celebrations because neighborhood surveillance there had helped reduce the crime rate, and because targets for blood donation quotas had been exceeded.

However, in an interview for the provincial newspaper "5 de Septiembre," Martha Ojeda Sánchez, who is CDR coordinator for Cienfuegos and was in charge of the national celebrations, admitted that problems existed.

"Of the 753 bases [in Cienfuegos], 58 aren't functioning properly for various reasons – for example because unsuitable leaders were elected," she said. "There are a significant number of CDRs which don't even hold meetings or set objectives."

Despite this, Ojeda Sánchez pointed that 303,000 new members had been recruited to the province's CDRs.

Cuban activist Clemente Álvarez Díaz believes Ojeda Sánchez was playing down the problems facing the CDR system.

"The membership statistics are probably correct," he said, noting that "people who come of age are put under immense pressure to join."

Alejandro Tur Valladares

November 2, 2012

“Large-scale absenteeism [affects] CDR neighborhood watch groups. Many leaders lack community leadership skills and some of them behave in a positively antisocial manner,” Álvarez Díaz said. He added that senior leaders appeared uninterested in trying to find out why the CDR network had lost its ability to really mobilize people over the last decade.

Official journalist Lisandra Marene interviewed a local CDR delegate, William López Mederos, for the “5 de Septiembre” newspaper.

“It’s no secret that people don’t come along like they used to,” López Mederos said. “When I was a boy, there were masses of people – the venue would fill up.”

Nowadays, he said, “out of a household of seven people, only two will go – sometimes no one. If you ask them to walk two or three blocks for a meeting, they won’t come.”

The anniversary celebrations begin the day before the date itself, September 28, with the preparation of a traditional caldosa stew of root vegetables and pork.

For Rubén, a CDR member in the Juanita neighborhood, the anniversary meal and party are still “one of the only moments in the year that Cuban families get together and socialize,” although he noted that “the state is giving fewer and fewer provisions for it.”

In Cienfuegos city, it was clear that some CDRs did not hold local parties at all on the day of the anniversary. When asked why this was, one CDR member cited “a lack of resources and general apathy.” José Suárez, a resident of the city’s Tulipán neighborhood, said Cubans were “not in the mood for parties.”

In former times, Suárez said, people went along “to fill their stomachs with a bit of caldosa or to have a beer.” These days, he claimed, “even that is too much effort.” •



*Committee for the Defense
of the Revolution logo on a building wall.
Photo: Abraham Orozco/Flickr*

CAUTIOUS WELCOME FOR EASIER EMIGRATION RULES

Authorities drop exit visa system, though they will still be able to block people from traveling.

From January next year, Cubans will no longer need to apply for permission to leave the country. The relaxation of travel rules is a major change, although the government will still be able to stop people leaving the country by refusing to give them passports.

A law announced on October 16 and in force from January 14, drops the requirement to obtain an exit permit. Cubans will be able to travel abroad freely as long as they have the latest version of the national passport.

The new law raises the cost of a passport from 55 to 100 convertible pesos, five months' wages for many Cubans. The "convertible peso" is an official currency operating in parallel with the normal peso and pegged to the US dollar at one to one.

The day the news was announced, Gertrudis, a 35-year-old resident of the Havana neighborhood Mantilla, awoke as usual to the Radio Reloj station. She could not believe her ears when she heard that in order to go overseas, she would no longer need a letter of invitation from a family member or friend abroad, or to apply for an exit permit from the migration office.

Dora Mirtha, who lives in the Arroyo Naranjo municipality of Havana, was more skeptical – she doubted things would be that easy.

"I envisage that the price of passports will double," she said. "I don't think the government will want to stop earning 150 convertible pesos per person for an exit permit. But I still feel almost free."

Ana, a resident of Buena Suerte in the Havana municipality of San Miguel del Padrón, was told of the change in a phone call from her husband Armando.

Armando had been planning to go to Italy and was waiting for a letter of invitation from his sister, who lives there. Since he no longer needs an invitation, he now plans to go to the United States instead.

Cuba's travel restrictions have been criticized for breaching the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."

Laura Paz
November 14, 2012



Leaving Cuba will now be easier thanks to relaxed migration rules.

Photo: Tony Hisgett/Flickr

Official figures show that of the 940,000 Cubans who travelled abroad as private citizens rather than on business over the last 12 years, 120,000 did not return. Around 1.9 million people of Cuban origin live in the US, most in Miami, Florida.

One Havana resident fears Cubans will rush for the exit when the restrictions are relaxed in January.

"Cuba has virtually no aircraft. I don't know how so many people are going to be able to travel, because as long as other countries give out visas, Cubans will do whatever it takes to emigrate anywhere," he said.

Independent journalist Odelín Alfonso Torna is among those who believe the new passport will simply replace the exit permit as a way of restricting travel, since the authorities can simply refuse to issue it.

"We have to wait and see who qualifies when they apply for or update their passports. We don't know how [the law] will be interpreted... concerning individuals who cannot obtain a passport for reasons of 'defense and national security,'" Torna said, quoting restrictions outlined in the new rules.

Elizardo Sánchez, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, a local human rights group, agreed that the situation would remain the same, with the authorities retaining "absolute control" over who enters or leaves the country.

Another reform, announced by Homero Acosta, Secretary of the Council of State, in a special TV broadcast on October 24, will allow Cubans who have left the country illegally since 1994, and who have spent more than eight years abroad, to return to the country. Doctors and athletes who have defected since 1990 will also be allowed to visit. The only people who will not be welcomed back will be those who got out via the US Naval Base at Guantanamo, which is located on Cuba's southeastern coast.

For Nelson, a resident of Havana's Arroyo Naranjo municipality, the easier travel rules do not mean a thing.

"Perhaps the new laws are good, but I can't go anywhere. I have no money, nor have I anyone who would pay for a trip," he said.

Nelson has made repeated attempts to get to the US in home-made boats. His travel method is "for free, by raft," he says. He has never yet reached his destination. •

Laura Paz is the pseudonym
of an independent journalist
in Cuba.

NO FAST EXIT FOR EDUCATED CUBANS

Easier emigration rules don't apply to graduates, who will have to wait five years in a move designed to slow brain drain.

Although the Cuban authorities have eased travel restrictions by dropping the requirement to apply for an exit permit, there is a catch. To prevent an exodus of qualified professionals, anyone with a university degree will have to wait five years before they can emigrate.

Migration Law 1312, announced on October 16 and effective from January 14, 2013, allows Cuban nationals to travel abroad freely as long as they have obtained the latest version of the passport. They no longer need to go through the onerous process of applying for permission to travel, or to produce a letter of invitation from someone living in their chosen destination.² In addition, the authorities have also abolished a law that stripped permanent emigrants of their rights and assets.

However, graduates will be barred from immediate travel, in order to "maintain a qualified workforce for the country's economic, social, scientific and technological development," the law says, noting that the waiting period reflects the time needed to "train a substitute."

An editorial in the official Communist Party newspaper Granma said the measure was imposed in response to United States policies which encouraged a brain drain in Cuba, specifically under the Cuban Adjustment Act and the Health Professionals Visa Program.

Cuba's office for migration has issued a notice making it clear that the rule will apply even if individuals resign from their jobs.

Benigno Guerra, 58, has a degree in biology and has been teaching for 38 years.

"After so many years working in education on a measly salary, I'm planning to move to Germany with most of my family. But I'm going to have to be patient and wait for five years to see whether they give me approval to leave," he said.

Guerra describes the waiting period as "more than a precautionary measure."

"It's a step based on fear, to protect against the brain drain," he said. "They know that when [the borders] are opened up, most qualified personnel will leave in search of job markets with fairer wages."

Osniel Carmona Breijo

November 30, 2012

2. See *Cautious Welcome for Easier Emigration Rules*, page 46.

José Fornaris, an independent journalist and head of the Association for Freedom of the Press, says the change to the travel rules is not a true reform, just the grudging restitution of one of the many rights Cubans have been deprived of.

“Free entry to and exit from a country is a right recognized by the United Nations’ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the Cuban government signed on February 28, 2008 but still hasn’t ratified,” Fornaris said. “They accuse North America of politicizing the situation... but this change has come about because of pressures inside and outside the island.”

Many Cubans leave the country illegally, sailing home-made boats and rafts to the United States and Central America.³

“It isn’t known – and they’ll never say – how many people have lost their lives crossing the Florida Straits, because there are no normal options for emigrating,” Fornaris said. •



University of La Habana.
Photo: Matthias Sachse

**Osniel Carmona Breijo is an independent journalist
who lives in Mayabeque province, Cuba.**

3. See *Cuba’s Floating Emigrants*, page 158.

CUBAN JOURNALIST ACCUSED OF SPREADING “FALSE NEWS”

Yaremis Flores Marín’s arrest sparks two days of protests.

Independent Cuban journalist Yaremis Flores Marín has described how she was held for three days last month, threatened with charges of spying and spreading false information.

Police accused her of being behind an article that she did not actually write.

Flores Marín is a lawyer by profession who also works as a journalist, collaborating with news websites like CubaNet, Diario de Cuba and Primavera Digital.

When she was freed on November 9 after 72 hours in detention, she described her experience.

“I was taking food to my dad, who had a suspected case of dengue fever, and when I arrived at Alamar Road, I saw a patrol car facing in the opposite direction on the road. Suddenly I heard a car braking behind me. Then Officer Tomás came up to me and said, ‘You have to come with me.’”

Over the next three days, the authorities tried to portray Flores Marín as a counterrevolutionary. She was assigned a criminal record number and taken to the prison most feared by Cuban dissidents, 100 y Aldabó, located on the south side of central Havana.

She experienced first-hand the methods used against dissidents.

“They accused me of spreading false news because of [an article on] dead prisoners in Mar Verde,” she said, referring to a prison in eastern Cuba which was badly hit by rain and wind during Hurricane Sandy in late October.

“They showed me an article which was signed not by me, but by the editors [of Cubanet] who published it,” she said.

The authorities also accused Flores Marín, who is a founder of the Cubalex project offering legal advice to people in need, of unlawfully publishing information about court cases.

According to Flores Marín, Officer Tamayo, who is in charge of her case, told her that this court information was classified so her actions therefore constituted “espionage.”

When Flores Marín was detained other independent journalists, bloggers and activists tried to get information on what

Laura Paz
December 11, 2012

was happening to her from State Security Service's Department 21, which deals with the press, in Havana's Marianao municipality.

This resulted in a wave of further detentions. Among those detained were Flores Marín's husband, Veizant Boloy, who is also a lawyer; Laritza Diversent, journalist and co-founder of Cubalex; and Antonio Rodiles, founder of the independent television program, Estado de Sats.

Boloy and Diversent were released the next day.

Diversent refused to sign a record of her arrest, which said she was accused of counterrevolutionary activity. She says the authorities were "really annoyed" at having people turn up so quickly to ask about Flores Marín.

Rodiles was held until November 26, when a charge of resisting arrest was dropped and he was fined 800 Cuban pesos, about 32 US dollars.

On November 8, a demonstration took place outside a police station in Havana in protest against the arrest of both Flores Marín and Rodiles. Well-known blogger Yoani Sánchez was among those detained; others in the group were beaten.

According to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, the average number of arrests since 2010 to date has tripled.⁴ •

*Yaremis Flores Marín (left) and Laritza Diversent at Cubalex headquarters.
Photo: Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa (APLP)*



4. See *Political Detentions Treble in Last Three Years*, page 58.

POLITICAL DETENTIONS TREBLE IN LAST THREE YEARS⁵

Over 6,000 political arrests in 2012.

Three times more Cubans were detained or arrested on political grounds last year than in 2010, rights activists say.

The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, CCDHRN, recorded 6,602 politically motivated arbitrary arrests in 2012. A separate count by the Hablemos Press Information Centre gives 5,503, although its records do not cover all of Cuba's provinces.

Data from both organizations indicate that 2012 saw three times the number of detentions as occurred in 2010, for which CCDHRN gives 2,074 and Hablemos Press 1,499. Both organizations cite figures of around 4,000 for 2011.

One reason for the high number of detentions is the Cuban authorities' tactic of using repeat short-term internments to harass anyone who criticizes the system.

According to CCDHRN, the worst months of 2012 were March – with 1,158 detentions reflecting jitters over a visit by Pope Benedict XVI – followed by December, when 564 people were detained to stop them marking Human Rights Day on December 10.

A paradigmatic example of short term arrests was that of Yoani Sánchez, perhaps Cuba's most famous blogger, who was arrested on October 4 en route to report on a trial. She was held for 30 hours and then released. But not all detentions end quickly. Four dissidents were convicted in October – Emilio Plana Robert and Rafael Matos Montes de Oca were given three-and-a half and two-and-a-half years respectively; Reinaldo Castillo Martínez was sentenced to a year and Alberto Ramos Prados to a year-and-a-half.

Independent journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, a reporter for Hablemos Press remains in the Combinado del Este prison after being detained in mid-September. Amnesty International recently declared him a prisoner of conscience.⁶

Damas de Blanco or "Ladies in White," who campaign for the release of political prisoners, accounted for the highest number of detainees last year, together with the Patriotic Union of Cuba.

Camilo Ganga
February 6, 2013

5. Camilo Ganga provides monthly updates for IWPR about political detentions in Cuba. This article combines two articles he wrote, analyzing the numbers for the year 2012.

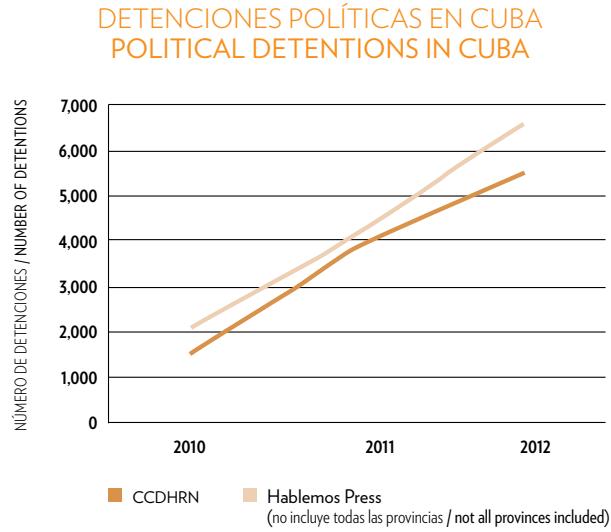
6. See section *Covering a Story: The Imprisonment and Release of Journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias*, pages 94-116.

Human rights defenders say the level of repression is also increasing against religious groups such as Pastors for Change and the Fire and Dynamics Apostolic Movement in the provinces of Granma, Camagüey and Ciego de Ávila.

CCDHRN's annual report cites "prolonged and systematic violation of national laws," and says that most of the 12,700 political detentions recorded in 2010-12 were in breach of proper criminal law procedures, such as the requirement to record arrests immediately and the right to notify relatives. •

*Ladies in White protesting
for the freedom of political prisoners
and human rights in Cuba.*

Photo: Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo



Camilo Ganga is the pseudonym of a journalist
living in Havana, Cuba.

THREE MEMBERS OF DISSIDENT FAMILY FACE TRIAL IN CUBA

After son refuses to do military service, he and his parents are charged with assaulting police.

A young man and his parents are facing charges of attempted murder after trying to stop police forcing him into the Cuban army.

In September, Osvaldo Rodríguez Castillo was due to be called up for the standard two years of conscripted service when his family delivered a letter to the local military office in Mayabeque province stating that he did not intend to go, on the grounds of conscientious objection.

Dissident views run in the family. His father Osvaldo Rodríguez Acosta is leader of an opposition group called the Cuban Patriotic Alliance Movement.

The response was swift. Three days later, on September 23, police arrived at the family home in the village of Bejucal with orders to take the younger Osvaldo away for his army service.

After failing to achieve this, the police returned in force together with some plain-clothes officers. In video footage taken at this point, members of the family point out their smashed-in door and injuries they sustained from the officers who burst in.

Some time later, neighbors say, the police dragged parents and their two sons out of the house. Scuffles ensued in the street as the family attempted to avoid being taken to jail.

According to one eyewitness, “by hitting and shoving them, they [the police] managed to take all of them away, even the younger son.”

This son, aged 12, was released the following day, but his father Rodríguez Acosta, mother Juana Castillo and older brother Osvaldo were detained.

The three were then charged with a serious crime – the attempted murder of a police lieutenant during the incident.

According to human rights activist Neldo Iván Echeverría Perdomo, the authorities allege that family members “physically attacked Lieutenant Raudel, causing a head injury.”

The public prosecutor in Mayabeque is seeking 15-year jail terms for all three suspects.

Rodolfo R. Ramírez Hernández

February 15, 2013

Prosecutors argued against granting them bail on the grounds that it was a serious crime and had “political overtones.”

In a bid to win temporary release for the mother, defense lawyer Aleika Rubio Castañeda filed medical evidence that the younger son had suffered mental trauma because of the arrests. Neighbors say Juana Castillo was released on January 1.

No trial date for the three accused has been made public. •



*Osvaldo Rodríguez Castillo after an encounter with police on September 23, 2012, before they came back and took him and his parents away.
Photo: Hablemos Press*

Rodolfo R. Ramírez Hernández is an independent journalist in Cuba.

HOUSE ARREST FOR CUBAN JOURNALIST

Released after 12 days in jail, Héctor Julio Cedeño Negrín denies charge that he hit a policeman.

Cuban journalist Héctor Julio Cedeño Negrín has been released after 12 days in detention, but he is under house arrest and may go on trial for assaulting a police officer – an offence he denies.

While in custody, he refused food and liquids in protest at his detention.

Cedeño Negrín was arrested in Fraternidad Park in the capital Havana on February 5 while photographing officials who were harassing self-employed taxi drivers.

At that moment, he said, “a police officer grabs me by the shirt and rips it. I was off-balance and I grabbed his shirt, which also ripped... When he noticed, he said I’d ripped his shirt and he hit me. I didn’t hit him back, and now he’s accusing me of assault.”

Later that day, Cedeño Negrín called Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, head of the Hablemos Press Information Centre, to tell him he was being held at a police station on Dragones Street in the Habana Vieja district.

He told the news agency chief he was accused of assault, and was starting a “hunger and thirst strike.”

Veizant Boloy, a lawyer and a journalist, visited the police station four days later, and was told by police that Cedeño Negrín had been transferred to the Vivac prison, on the outskirts of Havana.

Cedeño Negrín was released on February 17, and brought home in a police car. The officers in the car told him to “bend down and not look out,” so that he would be unable to see where he had been detained.

As he told journalist Odelín Alfonso Torna, he was still subject to “precautionary measures,” according to which he must remain under house arrest and present himself at a police station every week until his case comes to trial.

“They told me I was accused of assaulting a police officer,” he said.

He has refused to comply with these conditions and intends to continue his normal routine. •

Reporters in Cuba
February 22, 2013



Héctor Julio Cedeño Negrín.
Photo: Luis Felipe Rojas

Yaremís Flores, Laura Paz
and Roberto de Jesús
Guerra Pérez contributed
material for this article.

SELF-HARM COMMON IN CUBAN PRISONS

Inmates resort to extreme methods that can leave them disabled.

Inmates of Cuba's prison system frequently harm themselves, often causing permanent physical damage, according to the independent Jagua Press agency.

Jagua Press has gathered evidence from prisoners and their relatives in Cienfuegos province, many of whom say self-harming is commonplace.

Some cases are genuine suicide attempts. Others hope to gain release on grounds of disability, while others still want to draw attention to their cases and get a review.

The methods are often extreme, and include mutilation of fingers, hands and eyes; burning and lacerating the skin; swallowing sharp objects; sewing lips shut; and injecting HIV-infected blood into a vein.

One prisoner told Jagua Press how a fellow inmate removed both his own eyes, only to be returned to jail after being temporary discharged for treatment.

One of the most harmful techniques involves injecting petrol into an arm or a leg, which commonly leads to amputation.

Nicolás García Almenteros, sentenced to 30 years for burglary and other offences, had to have one of his hands amputated after injecting it with petrol. Later he did it again, and lost his other hand as a result.

Conditions in Cuba's prison system are poor. Inmates are subjected to beatings, and the reoffending rate is high for those who are released.

One inmate of the Ariza prison who spoke to Jagua Press by phone described poor accommodation, food and healthcare.

"Sanitary conditions are terrible," he said. "Medicines are scarce. Often there aren't even the commonest medicines like glibenclamide for treating diabetes."

Other convicts said Ariza prison was the only one with a proper infirmary, but it was short of pharmaceuticals, and the medical instruments there were inadequate and obsolete.

A health worker at the prison said the unsanitary conditions in Cienfuegos province's jails were an incubator for contagious diseases like cholera.

Complaints about nutrition are common, too.

Alejandro Tur Valladares

February 26, 2013

“They give us rotten ‘patipanza’ – a food made from cow’s stomach and hooves. On more than one occasion they have served us fish with larvae inside,” said an inmate.

Sewage leaking from one floor to another from broken drains is a major concern, he said.

“The septic tanks overflow and it’s a while before they clean it up,” the prisoner explained, adding, “The basement of the building is a paradise for rodents. We’ve learned to live with the rats; some of my fellow inmates have been bitten.”

One man whose brother is in jail said the shortage of medication and the poor rations were compounded by “unsanitary conditions and overcrowding.”

Hunger strikes have become very widespread as a way of protesting against conditions. Prison warders have resorted to harsh methods to deter others. They strip the prisoner naked and hold him in solitary confinement in a damp cell, denying him water.

Political prisoners, in particular, use hunger strikes as a form of protest, among them Sakharov Prize-winner Guillermo Fariñas and Orlando Zapata Tamayo, a dissident who died in February 2010 after starving himself for 86 days.⁷

Following numerous criticisms from the United Nations human rights body, the Cuban government has undertaken some reforms to the prison system in recent years.

The availability of food and its preparation have improved, and inmates are now allowed to make more phone calls than before, and for longer.

The authorities have also launched a new type of open prison where the emphasis is on rehabilitation. Inmates are paid to work in construction and agriculture, and are granted conjugal visits, temporary release, and better food and healthcare. •

*A view of Ariza Provincial Prison in Cienfuegos.
Photo: Alejandro Tur Valladares*



7. See *Life in a Cuban Jail*, page 112.

CUBAN SCHOOLS SLAP DOWN JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Refusal to conform to state ideology exposes faith group members to discrimination.

A member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Cuba filed a complaint with the state prosecutor last month alleging discrimination against her three school-age daughters.

She says the authorities have condoned acts of discrimination including physical and verbal violence, which have led the pupils to miss classes and their parents to move house.

"I demand a solution, because they are responsible for safeguarding young people on the island," said the woman, known by the pseudonym Ana to protect her family's identity. "I'm tired of the poor treatment they [my daughters] receive, and of the fact that no one is doing anything about it."

Her appeal to the prosecutor general follows unsuccessful applications to other state institutions. Cuba has no judicial mechanism for dealing with complaints about breaches of religious freedom.

Ana explained that because of the values held by Jehovah's Witnesses, "The girls do not wear school uniforms as the religion prohibits this. They don't sing the national anthem or pay tribute to national symbols, either."

The trouble began in Bayamo, a town in the eastern Granma province, where the children got into trouble for not taking part in the political activities that are a feature of school life in Cuba. This was noted in one of the girls' reports as the reason why she had failed fifth grade.

"The individual in charge of religious affairs for the province warned me that if the children didn't attend political activities, they would fail the year," Ana said.

For the school year starting 2011, the family moved back to the capital Havana. The girl who had failed fifth grade was allowed to attend classes again, but according to Ana, "the problems continued."

Another of her daughters told her that the teacher had slapped her on the head. The parents reported this to the police, but the case was shelved.

Ana says the school itself took no action, and the girls continue to be mistreated by teachers and bullied by their peers.

Yaremis Flores Marín

March 26, 2013

All three girls are upset and invent illnesses to avoid having to go to school. Ana says they have not been to school for nearly two months.

The Cuban government removed Jehovah's Witnesses from the registration of legal faith groups in 1974.

In their latest yearbook, the Jehovah's Witnesses say there are 1,400 congregations in Cuba, and over 95,000 "publishers", the term used for active members.

The state education system is heavily politicized, and the current school regulations require all pupils to be "willing to defend the socialist homeland." That is something Jehovah's Witnesses cannot do, as they are conscientious objectors. •



*Cuban schoolchildren under
the watchful eye of Che Guevara.
Photo: Mike Keran/Flickr*

Yaremis Flores Marín is an independent lawyer and citizen journalist in Cuba.

SIXTY ON HUNGER STRIKE IN EASTERN CUBA

Authorities step up intimidation in hope of ending protest.

At least 60 members of one of the largest dissident groups in Cuba are on hunger strike in several eastern provinces, demanding the release of one colleague and an end to violence against others.

The hunger strike started on April 17 with 38 members of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, UNPACU, in the Santiago de Cuba province. Their action was an expression of solidarity with UNPACU secretary Luis Enrique Lozada Igarza, who has been on hunger strike since April 9 at the Aguadores prison in Santiago de Cuba.

The group says more than 60 activists as well as members of Lozada Igarza's family are now taking part in the protest.

In a Twitter posting on May 2, UNPACU's leader José Daniel Ferrer said at least ten of the hunger strikers had been admitted to hospital and several more were in need of medical attention.

He says Lozada Igarza was arrested because he was accused of making "threats" against police officers. Prior to his arrest, he suffered repeated assaults, raids on his home, and thefts as the authorities tried to intimidate him into stopping his activism.

The day after the hunger strike began; the Cuban government reacted by blocking mobile phone traffic for the participants. They had been updating Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, head of the independent news agency Hablemos Press, but both calls and SMS messaging on their phones were interrupted.

In Havana, Guerra Pérez's mobile phone and the news agency's landline were cut off.

Hablemos Press staffer Magaly Norvis Otero borrowed a phone and called the state telecoms company ETECSA, noting, "They didn't give me any valid explanation and around 11 in the morning they reconnected both services."

In the early days of the hunger strike, activists handed out anti-government leaflets and posters in Santiago de Cuba city.

"Over the last 48 hours [since the hunger strike began], leaflets and posters have appeared in Reparto Sueño, the center of Santiago de Cuba city, in Baraguá in Ciego de Ávila province, and in Perico in western Matanzas province," UNPACU member Anyer Antonio Blanco Rodríguez said, again using a borrowed phone.

Frank Abel García

May 2, 2013

In Palmarito de Cauto, in Santiago de Cuba province, protesters held marches and “cacerolazos” – where people make a noise by banging pots and pans.

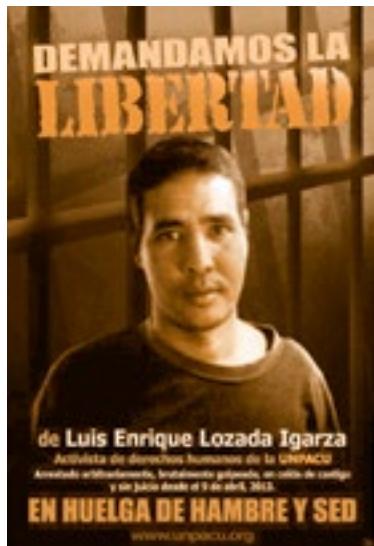
In response, uniformed police and State Security officers raided UNPACU members’ homes, arresting and beating them.

According to Blanco Rodríguez, “Part of the government’s response has been attacks against the homes of dissidents, Ariel Cruz Meneses in Banes in Holguín province, and Maximiliano Sánchez in Palmarito de Cauto... at least 25 people have been detained, two of them in Havana.”

At the end of February, UNPACU merged with another dissident group, the United Anti-Totalitarian Forum, FANTU. Combined, they are the largest opposition organization in Cuba.

One of UNPACU’s most well-known figures is its spokesman Guillermo “Coco” Fariñas, a 2010 Sakharov Prize winner. •

*Campaign poster for the release
of UNPACO secretary Luis Enrique Lozada
Igarza, “On Hunger and Thirst Strike.”
Image: Hablemos Press*



Frank Abel García is an independent journalist from Havana.

CUBA GRANTS PRISON ACCESS ON OWN TERMS

First visit in years highlights lack of regular outside monitoring.

When the Cuban authorities offered foreign journalists rare access to the prison system last month, it was very much on their own terms.

The visit took place on April 9, less than a month before the United Nations Human Rights Council conducted its periodic review of the situation in Cuba.

The tour for foreign and local journalists took in four institutions – the big Combinado del Este jail, a woman's prison in Havana, an open prison and a juvenile detention center.

Cuba has about 200 penal institutions housing over 57,000 inmates – one of the highest per capita prison populations in the world.

Human rights organizations say abuse is rife in the penal system, and the government does not allow outside groups to conduct regular inspections.

Four years ago, Canada, France and Britain proposed a system under which the UN and other observers would conduct periodic reviews of Cuban prisons. Havana rejected the idea. In 2009, the Cuban government invited Manfred Nowak, the UN special rapporteur on torture at the time, to carry out research in the country's prisons, but neither he nor his successor have been able to conduct such a visit.

This track-record, and the limited and orchestrated nature of the recent visit, have raised doubts about what the foreign journalists were shown.

Lieutenant-Colonel Roelis Osorio, governor of Cuba's largest prison, Combinado del Este, told the visitors that detainees were not supposed to be held longer than six months.

"The time-frame for holding a court case is 180 days. Sometimes, but not often, there can be a delay of up to a year," he said.

The limit has certainly been exceeded in the case of Sonia Garro, a member of the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) protest group, who together with her husband Ramón Alejandro has been in prison without trial for 13 months.

On April 9 – the day of the visit – journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias was released from prison after spending almost seven months without a court date being set⁸. He spent most of

Yaremis Flores Marín

May 8, 2013

8. See *Freedom for Detained Cuban Journalist*, page 110.

that time in Combinado del Este, but was transferred to the Valle Grande jail shortly before he was let out.

During the journalists' tour, Colonel Osmani Leyva Ávila, deputy head of the Cuban prisons directorate said that "only seven to nine per cent" of all prison inmates were in pre-trial detention. When court cases were delayed, he said, it was only "because of the rigor of the Cuban judicial system in processing criminal cases."

Lt-Col Osorio said the national reoffending rate for ex-convicts was only nine per cent, and described a rehabilitation program of voluntary and paid work.

In an article published around the time of the visit, the official newspaper Granma quoted prisoners as saying they earned 700 to 900 pesos a month while behind bars. That is considerably more than the average wage of 400 pesos a month, around 15 US dollars. An ex-con who gave his name as Carlos, who recently left a type of open prison known as a Work and Study Centre, said he never received anything like those wages.

"They paid me four pesos for weeding a furrow over one kilometre long. On average, I earned 120 pesos a month," he said. "The working day was seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. Lunch consisted of water with sugar and bread. I lost ten kilograms." ●



*Prisión Melena del Sur, Mayabeque Province, was not amongst the four prisons that journalists were allowed to visit.
Photo: Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo*

CUBAN DISSIDENTS DENOUNCE SMEAR CAMPAIGN

Government-linked TV station airs allegations that leading protest group is badly run and financially opaque.

Leaders of a Cuban dissident group called the Ladies in White say the government is attempting to undermine it by releasing videos portraying members as corrupt and embroiled in infighting.

The short films were released to coincide with the award of a major human rights prize to the Ladies in White earlier this year, and broadcast on a pro-government television channel, Cubainformación.

The Ladies in White or “Damas de Blanco” group was set up by women campaigning for the release of 75 relatives imprisoned in the “Black Spring” of 2003.

Their trademark protest action involves attending Sunday mass wearing white clothing and then holding a silent march.

In 2005, the European Parliament awarded the Ladies in White the Sakharov Prize for their human rights work, but travel restrictions prevented the group from accepting it until Cuba relaxed its emigration rules this year.

Berta Soler, the head of the Ladies in White since 2011, travelled to Brussels on April 23 to accept the prize. She is the wife of Ángel Moya Acosta, one of the dissidents imprisoned in 2003.

During Soler’s trip, Cubainformación TV carried two videos questioning her honesty and the financial probity of the movement as a whole.

Both called “Corruption in the Ladies in White”, the films feature edited interviews with current and past members of the group, as well as photos and clips taken from television programmes.

Soler’s voice is played at reduced speed to a background of reggaeton-style music, with the apparent aim of mocking her.

The films include four Ladies who were active members at the time of the interviews – Leonor Reino Borges, Mirtha Gregoria Gómez, Lilia Castaner Hernández and Raquel Castillo.

The films also include testimony from former members Katia Sonia Martín, Ana Luisa Rubio and Miriam Reyes Gómez, who were expelled from the movement in 2012.

Camilo Ganga

July 22, 2013

In her interview, Reyes Gómez calls Soler a “monster” with a violent temper and complains she never received money she was owed by the movement. Another interviewee, Martín, criticised the group’s disciplinary procedures and claimed that members did not voice complaints for fear of being expelled.

Reino Borges and Castillo, meanwhile, cast doubt on the way donations from Cuban exiles and others were used.

Those who appeared in the videos have since acknowledged that they gave the interviews and that the words used are their own, but claimed the filming was done under false pretences.

*Ladies in White on fifth avenue
on their customary Sunday walk.
Photo: Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo*



Castaner, Castillo and Ana Luisa Rubio said that a foreign journalist visited them at the beginning of 2012, presenting himself as an American with links to the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. He told the women that he was investigating whether the money that USAID provided for democracy promotion in Cuban was being lost to corruption.

At the time of her interview, Castaner was on hunger strike in protest at the disappearance of her son. She said later she had been weak, depressed and unable to think clearly during the filmed interview, which the visitor persuaded her to give alone.

Castillo and Rubio said they never even saw a camera and did not know that they were being recorded.

Castillo said the man who interviewed her showed her a video of an argument at Ladies in White headquarters about a gay man who was refused permission to parade with the group.

She says a comment she made – “yes, they fought” – was taken out of context to make it appear that there were constant arguments over money and resources.

Ladies in White held a public event in late April to denounce the films as part of a campaign of psychological warfare waged by the Cuban government.

Senior member Laura Labrada told reporters that money and resources were distributed fairly.

“We are all defenders of human rights, we all take knocks, and we are all [Ladies in White founder] Laura Pollán,” she said.

Another activist, journalist Magaly Norvis Otero, told the audience, “There are many people present here who have been in a bad way and who have been helped by us. We are all witness to how we all try to protect each other.”

She also addressed a claim which Reyes Gómez made in the film that Soler instructed participants in the Sunday processions that “if someone falls, everyone else should leave them and carry on walking.” According to Norvis Otero, “It meant the fight must go on... it didn’t mean they were going to leave anyone lying on the ground.”

On returning from abroad, Soler decided not to take any action against Reino, Gómez and Castaner.

Castillo, however, was expelled, and now says she was not given a chance to put her side of the story but was left “at the mercy of government repression and impunity.”

“We are all defenders of human rights, we all take knocks, and we are all Laura Pollán.”

Asked to comment on the expulsion, Soler told IWPR, “Sometimes it’s better to keep your mouth closed and your tongue inside it than to talk too much.”

Soler insisted there were no secrets about the group’s funding from international awards and diaspora donations.

“We are now autonomous. We have our own resources,” she said. “We have the Sakharov Prize in a bank account in Spain with 16,000 euro. We also have the Václav Havel Prize [52,000 euro prize shared with two other winners]... and monetary assistance from brothers and sisters in exile and persons of good will in Miami, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. In all, they [the exiles] have donated 24,000 US dollars, which is in an account in the United States.”

She said the money was used to pay for travel, to support the families of detained members, and to provide clothing.

“Nevertheless, we know it isn’t enough,” she added.

Soler said the videos did not worry her as they were just “another example of how the Cuban government is alarmed at our peaceful behaviour in the streets, and at our very existence. The government knows we’re going to continue.”

In contrast to Soler’s robust attitude, other Ladies in White fear that the emergence of the films indicates the group has been infiltrated by the Cuban security services. In late June, 19 members resigned from the movement on the grounds that leaders had not fully investigated claims that a regime collaborator was active within the organisation. •



Laura Pollán
te quedas entre nosotros

Laura Pollán

Laura Pollán
te quedas entre nosotros



COVERING A STORY:

THE IMPRISONMENT AND RELEASE OF

JOURNALIST CALIXTO RAMÓN MARTÍNEZ ARIAS

IWPR always knew that working in Cuba has its risks. Nothing brought that more to home than the arrest of one of the program trainees, Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, on September 16, 2012.

Twitter feeds began to emerge about his detention, just as IWPR was readying Martínez Arias's reports on the housing sector for publication.⁹

Martínez Arias spent 205 days behind bars, where he endured three hunger strikes and severe conditions. He was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and received support and solidarity from civil society in and outside of Cuba.

During that time, IWPR's Cuban partners ensured continuous coverage of the story, helping to keep the case alive globally.

The pieces of writing below are a chronological selection of news articles about the case, ending with an interview with Martínez Arias after his release on April 9, 2013. Some have been edited to avoid repetition.

9. See *The Real Cost of Bureaucracy in Cuba*, page 130, and *Sewage Troubles in Havana*, page 138.

CUBAN JOURNALIST FACES CHARGE OF INSULTING CASTROS

Press rights group highlights absurdity of arresting Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias for reporting on matters of public interest.

An independent journalist in Cuba, Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, is to be charged with being disrespectful towards Raúl and Fidel Castro, the country's current and former presidents.

Martínez Arias, a correspondent for the independent news agency Hablemos Press, was detained on September 16. If convicted, he could face a prison sentence of one to three years.

The authorities maintained silence on Martínez Arias's detention for nearly 72 hours, until Captain Marisela of the Santiago de las Vegas police department in Havana province announced that the detainee was to be charged with "the crime of aggravated disrespect." In Cuban law the criminal offence of "disrespect" is a broad term covering defamation or other insults towards government officials. It carries more severe penalties when the head of state or another top figure is involved.

The authorities have not yet said when and how they believe Martínez Arias insulted the Castro brothers.

The journalist was detained at Havana's international airport while investigating a story about a damaged shipment of medicines sent by the World Health Organization.

The law requires the police to allow communication with detained persons, however in this case not only was access obstructed, but also a lawyer and editor were themselves temporarily detained when they made inquiries about Martínez Arias.

Hablemos Press director Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez went to the Santiago de las Vegas police station the day after Martínez Arias's arrest to ask for information.

"The officer there told us that [Martínez Arias] had been transferred to another station, without giving any more details," he said.

At one in the afternoon of September 19, Guerra Pérez returned to the police station accompanied by independent lawyer Veizant Boloy and they demanded to be informed of Martínez Arias's legal situation.

Instead of being allowed to communicate with him, the two were detained.

"We asked Captain Marisela if we could see [Martínez Arias] and give him some toiletries. Then a State Security Department agent who called himself Yuri appeared, accompanied by a police

Yaremis Flores Marín

September 25, 2012



Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias.

Photo: Hablemos Press

officer,” Boloy said. “They asked for our identification and took us to the cells.”

Boloy and Guerra Pérez were held for seven hours then released.

“Our detention and everything that happened at the station was authorized by Major Arnaldo Espinosa, head of the Santiago de las Vegas Station,” Boloy said, “Although it’s the State Security officers who are really in charge.”

Their detention did allow them to confirm that, contrary to what Guerra Pérez had been told, Martínez Arias was being held at the same police station.

“When we went down to the cells we shouted Calixto’s name. He answered us, surprised. We saw wounds on his face caused by blows from officers,” Guerra Pérez said.

He added, “On the Monday [September 17], they lied to us. Calixto was always at that station.”

Guerra Pérez reported later that on September 20, Martínez Arias was treated for a swelling in his left eye at the National Hospital and then transferred to the prison known as “El Vivac” in western Havana.

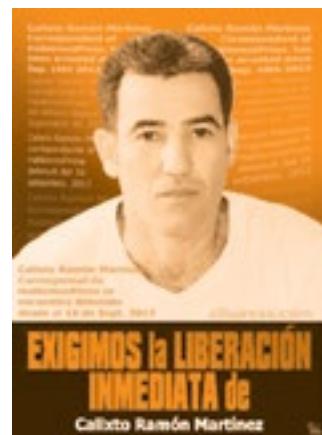
Prosecutors have yet to confirm when the detainee will be able to engage a lawyer. Only lawyers belonging to the National Organization of Collective Law Offices are allowed to defend citizens in court cases.

The Inter American Press Association has condemned Martínez Arias’s arrest.

“It is a contradiction that a journalist faces possible imprisonment for reporting on matters of public interest, when these matters should really be an alert [for the need] to fix the problem,” Gustavo Mohme, head of the association’s Committee on Freedom of the Press and Information, said on September 21.

Martínez Arias has been detained on numerous occasions while working as a journalist, but this is the first time he has been charged with an offence.

In an interview at the end of August he said his mission, as an independent journalist was “to break down the wall of silence that the government has imposed on this island, and to report human rights abuses.” •



*Campaign poster for the
release of Martínez Arias
Design: Hablemos Press*

CUBAN JOURNALIST PRESSURED TO END HUNGER STRIKE

Authorities order water withheld from Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias.

Independent journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, a reporter for Hablamos Press Information Center, has been on hunger strike for close to a month now.

Martínez Arias, 42, began a hunger strike on November 10. At a meeting with his sister on November 30, he told her he planned to carry on, as a way of protesting against overcrowding in the jail and also against having to wear prison uniform and being stripped of all of his belongings.

The authorities at the Combinado del Este Prison, where Martínez Arias is being held, are refusing to disclose information on his health.

A fellow inmate, who requested anonymity, said by phone that on December 7, State Security officers took Martínez Arias out of the punishment cell he was in and asked him to end his hunger strike.

The prisoner said Martínez Arias told him afterwards that the officers were “from Villa Marista” – State Security headquarters.

“They took him out to try to force him to end his hunger strike [and demonstrate that] they won’t give in to pressure. But he made it clear that he would continue his strike because they had refused to guarantee him any concessions,” the inmate said. “When he returned to his cell they denied him water in order to force him to end his strike.”

Another prisoner confirmed the incident, saying he saw two officers in green uniforms with State Security insignia taking Martínez Arias out of his cell on December 6.

The fellow inmate saw him the following morning and Martínez Arias told him that “he was feeling weak, but wouldn’t give up his strike.”

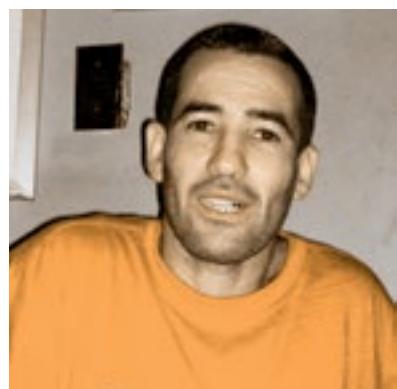
Speaking on December 6, Martínez Arias’s lawyer said he had still not been given access to the journalist’s records, despite having requested them on two occasions.

In a statement issued on December 7, the Inter American Press Association reiterated its demand for “the immediate release of the Cuban journalist... who has been imprisoned since September and has been on hunger strike for nearly a month in protest against the appalling conditions in which he is being held.”

The president of the association’s committee for press freedom, Claudio Paolillo, said, “The Cuban government has a tendency to ignore local and international appeals against their deplorable human rights abuses. We cannot be silent in the face of constant violations.”

Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez

December 8, 2012



Martínez Arias immediately after his release.

Photo: Hablamos Press

The Hablemos Press Information Center has set up a petition on the change.org website to win broad international solidarity for Martínez Arias's case. It is asking President Castro and the official Union of Cuban Journalists to act to secure the journalist's immediate release. •

CUBAN JOURNALIST ENDS HUNGER STRIKE

UN body asked to look into continued arbitrary detention of Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias.

Detained Cuban journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias has abandoned his 33-day hunger strike.

Martínez Arias informed Hablemos Press Information Center of his decision by phone on December 13. He had refused to eat since November 10, in protest against conditions in the prison where he is being held.

Martínez Arias told the Havana-based news agency that several family members came to the Combinado del Este jail to ask him to end his hunger strike. The phone call was cut just as he was about to outline the reasons for his decision.

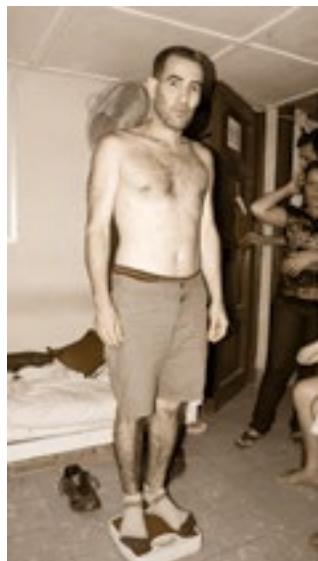
His current state of health is not known, nor is it clear whether he is getting medical attention.

On December 12, the Corriente Martiana civil society group, together with Hablemos Press, emailed a submission on Martínez Arias's case to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions (WGAD) and to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

WGAD was created by the UN Human Rights Commission in 1991 and is the only mechanism that allows individuals in any part of the world to make direct petitions to the United Nations.

Earlier this month, WGAD declared that Cuba's detention of United States national Alan Gross, sentenced to 15 years, was in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which President Raúl Castro signed in 2008. •

*Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez
December 16, 2012*



*Martínez Arias claims to have lost between 18 and 20 kilos during his imprisonment.
Photo: Hablemos Press*

FIVE MONTHS ON, CUBAN JOURNALIST STILL HELD FOR CASTRO “INSULT”

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias is one of two reporters in jail for asking difficult questions.

Five months after his arrest, Cuban journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias remains in jail on charges of insulting the country's top leaders, with no trial date in sight.

At the end of January, the international human rights watchdog Amnesty International declared Martínez Arias a prisoner of conscience, arguing that the real reason for his detention was because he had reported on controversial subjects.

The authorities regularly detain journalists for short periods of up to two weeks. One of the most recent cases involved the journalist Héctor Julio Cedeño Negrín.¹⁰

Martínez Arias is one of two Cuban journalists who have been detained for much longer. The other is José Antonio Torres, a former correspondent for the official newspaper *Granma* who was detained in 2011 and given a 14-year sentence in June 2012. He was convicted of espionage, although his real offence seems to have been writing critical pieces about a construction project in the eastern Santiago de Cuba region.

Martínez Arias was born in the Campechuela municipality of the eastern province of Granma in 1970. After leaving school, he initially worked as a carpenter, but after joining the Cuban Pro-Human Rights Party, he decided to become a journalist in 2009.

Interviewed a month before his arrest in September, he said he chose this career “because I knew there was a possibility of creating a free press for the good of the people; and secondly because I always knew it was necessary to inform the world about the reality of Cuba.”

Martínez Arias wrote for *Hablemos* Press, which reports on human rights violations in Cuba and was one of the first journalists to cover last year’s outbreak of cholera in eastern Cuba.

While detained at the Combinado del Este prison, he went on hunger strike on November 10 and demanded to be allowed to wear normal clothes as he regarded himself as a political prisoner, not a criminal.

In a phone call in which he told *Hablemos* Press director Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez of his decision, Martínez Arias urged international human rights organizations to visit the prison, which he said was not fit for human habitation.

Laura Paz
February 27, 2013

10. See *House Arrest for Cuban Journalist*, page 66.

"There are 36 prisoners living in a space 13 or 14 meters by six meters. The day I arrived, I had to sleep on the floor due to the number of inmates," he said.

He was punished for his hunger strike by being placed in a solitary confinement cell known as the "corridor of death," but only abandoned his protest 33 days later because relatives begged him to.

In the interview he gave before his arrest, Martínez Arias criticized Cuba's state-run media, which he said had "instilled terror in people about what life is like in the capitalist world... they only show the negative side." He said that the official publications, Granma and Juventud Rebelde, were state mouthpieces rather than proper newspapers and the former was in any case so thin, at four pages, that it could not possibly keep people informed.

Of his own experiences as a journalist, Martínez Arias singled out "a report I did on a three-year-old girl who needed an operation... She was born with esophageal atresia and there had been constant bureaucratic toing and froing on her case. My journalism, in telling the girl's story, got the health authorities and government interested in the case and indeed many people abroad... [who] wanted to help her since her family lived in extreme poverty."

The international group Reporters Without Borders describes Cuba as "the only country in the Americas not to allow any independent press to operate outside the straightjacket of the state." The Committee to Protect Journalists, meanwhile, ranks Cuba ninth on its list of countries with the most censorship in 2012. It is the only country in the Americas on the list. •

HOPES OF FREEDOM FOR CUBAN JOURNALIST

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias abandons three-week hunger strike after authorities hint at release.

The Cuban authorities have promised to release detained journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias within days, according to Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, head of the independent news agency Hablemos Press.

Speaking on March 29, Guerra Pérez said the authorities had indicated that Martínez Arias, detained since September, would be moved from the Combinado del Este prison to the Valle Grande facility in the

Laura Paz
April 2, 2013

coming days, and then released. In response to the apparent concession, Martínez Arias had ended a second 22-day hunger strike.

Although Guerra Pérez, for whose news agency Martínez Arias was a reporter, welcomed the move, he described it as “illogical” given that the suspect had been held for six months without trial.

“I’ll believe it when I see him on the outside,” Guerra Pérez told the online news site Diario de Cuba.

As of March 16, Martínez Arias had been in jail for six months and was 11 days into his second hunger strike to demand his freedom. Since March 20, dissident groups have held six-hour vigils every day to press for the journalist’s release.

Sara Martha Fonseca, Executive Secretary of the Cuban Pro-Human Rights Party, said members in Camagüey, Santa Clara and Holguín had joined the peaceful protest. Other groups like the Independent and Democratic Cuba Party and the National Front for Civic Resistance were also taking part.

Hablemos Press has been leading an international campaign on the journalist’s behalf on social media websites. On March 22, it delivered a letter to the papal nuncio in Havana asking newly-elected Pope Francis to intercede with President Raúl Castro’s government to secure the immediate release of Martínez Arias.

“Your Holiness, we are deeply concerned about Calixto Ramón’s situation. The prison authorities have transferred him to a punishment cell... without the right to go outside at any time of day for sunlight or fresh air, in order to force him to end his hunger strike,” the letter from Hablemos Press said.

On her recent world tour, famous Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez raised Martínez Arias’s cases during public appearances. •

*Commission for Assistance to Political
Prisoners and their Families (CAPPF)
demanding the release of Martínez Arias.
Photo: CAPPF*



FREEDOM FOR DETAINED CUBAN JOURNALIST

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias spent half a year in jail without being sent to trial.

Cuban journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias was freed on the evening of April 9 after spending six months in jail.

"I feel really good and very happy, and at the same time really grateful to you and to all those who showed concern with my situation," he told this reporter online.

Interviewed by the Diario de Cuba news site, Martínez Arias said the authorities did not tell him why they were letting him go. "They didn't explain anything," he said in the interview. "They gave me a document allowing me to move about in the streets. It seems I won't have to go to trial."

Even when he was arrested last September, the police appeared reluctant to take responsibility.

"The policewoman who informed me of the charges against me at Santiago de Vegas police station told me that State Security had ordered my arrest and the process that should be applied," he told this reporter. "It's a game they play to make themselves seem innocent and to offload the blame onto others."

Martínez Arias was released a day after he went back on hunger strike, the third such protest he had undertaken since his arrest in September.

On this occasion, at least nine other Cuban journalists and human rights defenders mounted hunger strikes in sympathy with their detained colleague and to press for his release.

"Thanks to everyone who was concerned about me – the press, human rights organizations, and activists."

Martínez Arias also commented on his arrest at Havana airport on September 16, while investigating a story about a delivery of expired medicines arriving in the country. "I saw them there – the workers showed them to me," he said.

The real reason for his arrest, he believes, was that he had given unwelcome publicity to outbreaks of infectious diseases in Cuba.

"I was imprisoned because of the news articles I wrote about cholera and dengue fever," he told Diario de Cuba.

His detention was condemned by Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Inter American Press Agency, as well as several western governments.

Dana Sants
April 10, 2013



*Martínez Arias receives an embrace from his colleagues at Hablemos Press upon his release.
Photo: Hablemos Press*

Reporters Without Borders welcomed his release, noting at the same time that “it must not divert attention from the continuing harassment of independent journalists and bloggers, and the fate of other detainees such as Luis Antonio Torres, a reporter for the official daily Granma, held since May 2011, and the writer Ángel Santiesteban-Prats, author of a blog called “Los hijos que nadie quiso,” held since 28 February.” •

LIFE IN A CUBAN JAIL

Journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias speaks about his own experiences and the mistreatment of other prisoners.

Cuban reporter Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias, freed in April after six months detention without trial, has spoken of his time in prison and the poor conditions suffered by fellow inmates.

He was released on April 9, the same day a group of foreign journalists were allowed a rare visit to the Combinado del Este prison where he had been held, although by then he had already been transferred to another jail, Valle Grande.¹¹

Now feeling “emotionally, spiritually and physically” well, Martínez Arias said warders at the Combinado del Este prison treated him more carefully than they did other inmates.

“It was different in a way, without it being made obvious,” he said. “The guards never physically mistreated me.”

The exception was one officer at the prison, who gave him a hard time.

“There was psychological abuse, but it always came from the same man, a captain who calls himself Coseo,” the journalist said. “He said he was in charge of discipline in the block where I was held. He denied me water on one occasion and often he wouldn’t give me my mattress on time.”

“I wasn’t really a target for them [warders] but for State Security.”

Martínez Arias said he was helped by the respect and support that other prisoners showed him.

“Life as an inmate is difficult in every way. As a political prisoner, I felt proud because I knew I was in jail because of my ideals,” he said. “The respect that other prisoners show you these days is different from before and it makes you feel better... given the hardship you live with in jail.”

Laura Paz
May 8, 2013

11. See *Freedom for Detained Cuban Journalist*, page 110, and *Cuba Grants Prison Access on Own Terms on the visit*, page 80.

While in prison, Martínez Arias mounted three hunger strikes, the first of which lasted 33 days in November-December.

“I sensed the affection and respect that the prisoners held for me. When I ended my first hunger strike, the other inmates in my sector treated me really well. They brought me soup and told me, ‘We’re going to get you better in a week; we’re going to get you as fat as you were before.’”

He added, “The day I was transferred to Valle Grande prison [on April 5], everyone hugged me and wished me success. They told me to stand firm.”

While in jail, Martínez Arias had an opportunity to see the way the average prisoner is treated.

“I had some very difficult and unpleasant experiences... seeing the guards abuse some of the prisoners. I saw how they self-harmed by cutting themselves because they disputed the punishments they’d been given,” he said.

While the Cuban government prides itself on its healthcare provision, that does not extend to the facilities where Martínez Arias was held.

“The medical care in Valle Grande and Combinado del Este is terrible,” he said. “In Combinado del Este... there’s an inmate called the ‘health promoter’ who comes round on Mondays to take a note of who is ill so that they can be attended to over the course of the week. By the time the doctor comes, you may no longer be ill or you might be dead. Prisoners self-harm as a way of demanding medical care. A lack of medicines is a problem – I was taken for a consultation at one point and the doctor told me the only thing he had was anti-inflammatory cream.”

The case against Martínez Arias does not seem to have been formally dropped. On his release, he was given a document referring to a “change in interim measures.”

Martinez Arias offered an explanation of the Castro insult charges. When he was detained at Havana airport, police accused him of being in the capital “illegally.”

“I told them that if I wasn’t legal in Havana, then Fidel and Raúl Castro must be illegal as well, since they come from Santiago de Cuba.

“...The other inmates in my sector treated me really well. They brought me soup and told me, ‘We’re going to get you better in a week; we’re going to get you as fat as you were before.’”

So a day after hitting me and putting me in a cell, the police told me I was accused of showing disrespect for the leaders of the Revolution."

Asked whether he expected to be detained again, Martínez Arias said, "It's going to happen again because I am going to continue working and they don't want a free and independent press. They want to maintain censorship at any price." •



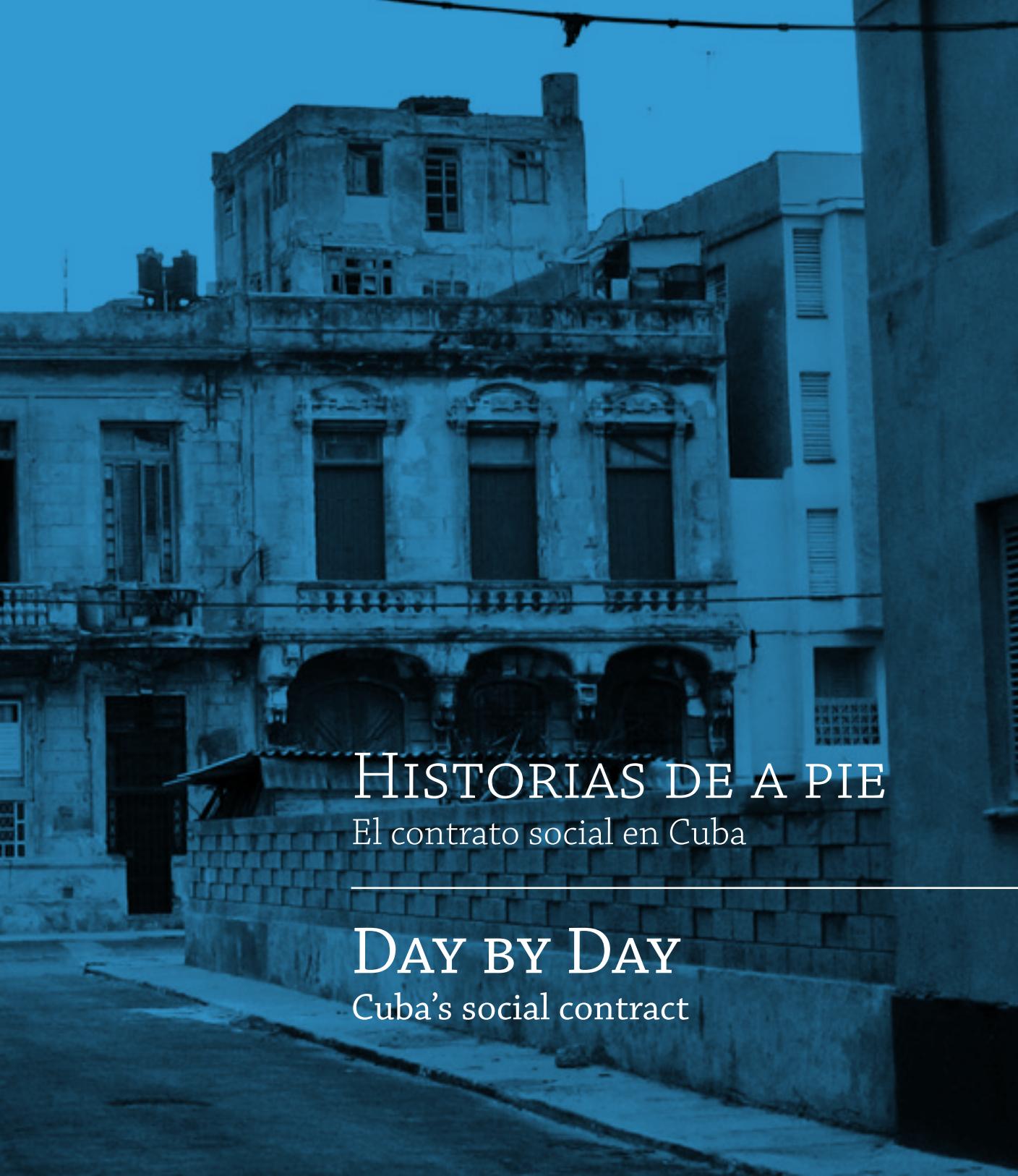
*The entrance to Combinado
del Este Prison.
Martínez Arias in an interview.
Photos: Hablemos Press*





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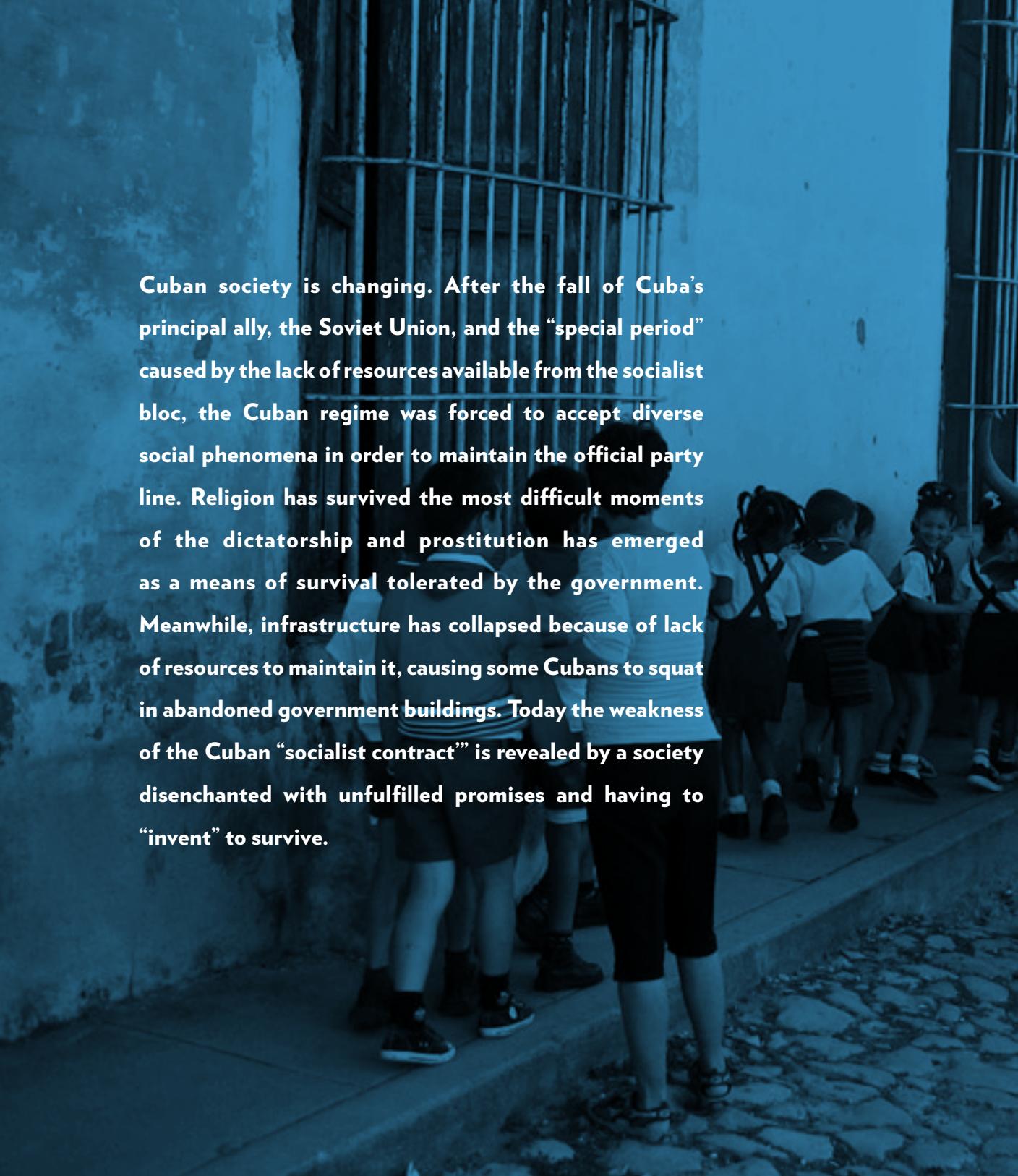


HISTORIAS DE A PIE

El contrato social en Cuba

DAY BY DAY

Cuba's social contract



Cuban society is changing. After the fall of Cuba's principal ally, the Soviet Union, and the "special period" caused by the lack of resources available from the socialist bloc, the Cuban regime was forced to accept diverse social phenomena in order to maintain the official party line. Religion has survived the most difficult moments of the dictatorship and prostitution has emerged as a means of survival tolerated by the government. Meanwhile, infrastructure has collapsed because of lack of resources to maintain it, causing some Cubans to squat in abandoned government buildings. Today the weakness of the Cuban "socialist contract" is revealed by a society disenchanted with unfulfilled promises and having to "invent" to survive.





DENGUE FEVER RIFE IN CUBA

In one town outside Havana, medics say they are seeing three to five new cases a day.

One morning at the end of April, Párraga, a low-income community on the outskirts of Havana, awoke to the noise of trucks and construction machinery breaking up the roads.

Residents were delighted – they hoped that after repairing the major highways, they would deal with the potholes that cover the other roads in the area. Standing water in the potholes is an ideal breeding ground for the mosquitos which transmit dengue fever. However, once the main roads had been resurfaced, the roadwork machines left.

“All the residents were really happy... we’d been asking the government to do something for our community for years,” Párraga resident Miriam said. “The roads are completely run-down, full of potholes with water, and impassable for vehicles and for those of us who live here. It was so disappointing when we saw that after a few weeks, they gathered up... their equipment and left, having only fixed the main highways. They left our roads in the same condition as before. They’ve been falling apart for over ten years.”

Dengue fever, originally from Africa, is now common in parts of Latin America along with the yellow fever mosquitos (*Aedes aegypti*) which transmit it.

In August, the Inter Press Service news agency quoted the Cuban health ministry as saying mosquito infestation had reached “critical” level in 23 municipalities in the country, 15 of them in Havana province. No details were provided about the number or severity of cases.

The Cuban government does not report the number of dengue cases to the Pan-American Health Organization, but independent journalists in the country say hundreds of people have been hospitalized with the disease this year, at least five of them have died.

“A group of residents have been to the People’s Authority [local council] several times to demand a solution to our problem,” Miriam said. “They promise over and over again that they’ll send an inspector to assess the state of the roads, which fill with water when it rains and are a guaranteed breeding-ground for mosquitos.”

Yaimí Alfonso Miret

September 13, 2012



Filled with stagnant water, the potholes on Párraga’s roads they are an ideal place for mosquitos to breed.

Photo: Yaimí Alfonso Miret

According to a local doctor who did not want to be identified, “Emergency staff at the polyclinic in Párraga attend three to five patients with dengue symptoms on a daily basis.”

One resident said he had been told by a worker from the government’s Campaign Against Vectors that he was in Párraga to reinforce local efforts to combat the mosquitos.

“[Párraga] is a source of dengue and it’s rumored that deaths continue. Although we can’t confirm the precise number, we know the authorities are alarmed. They have us working non-stop,” he quoted the health worker as saying. •

Yaimí Alfonso Miret is an independent journalist in Cuba.

THE REAL COST OF BUREAUCRACY IN CUBA

Housing procedures are complex and protracted, but can be helped along with a bribe.

For Cubans, getting anything done can be a real nightmare because of the amount of paperwork required. It can also be an expensive process because of the bribes taken by state officials.

People who have been caught in the spider's web of bureaucracy say it is usual to pay a sweetener to cut through the arduous and seemingly endless process of obtaining the right approvals.

The Municipal Housing Department in the capital Havana is a prime example of the obstructions and corrupt practices that people face. Completing the procedures needed to get a building license, buy a house or just change one's address can take years.

Government Decree 217/97 from 1997 requires anyone wishing to live in Havana to obtain permission from the Municipal Architecture and Urban Planning Department, a sub-department of Housing. Ostensibly the permit is to certify that the accommodation in question "meets minimum housing standards," but in fact the regulation was created to limit the number of people migrating to Havana from the provinces.

An official document, displayed in the identity cards office in the city's Arroyo Naranjo quarter, states that people from other provinces applying to change their address are subject to Decree 217/97, which only allows the Municipal Housing Department to approve a provisional change in address for a six-month period. During that time, the authorities will evaluate whether a permanent change should be permitted.

This applies even to spouses wishing to move in with their partners; the only exceptions are the parents, children, siblings and grandchildren of the owners of the home where they are seeking to live.

An officer from the Santiago de las Vegas police department said the decree means that any citizen found to be living outside their place of residence is acting illegally, they will be sent back to their place of origin and fined up to 300 pesos, equivalent to 11 US dollars.

"If they reoffend, they can be punished with up to three years in prison for the crime of disobedience," he added.

These regulations can, however, be bent by anyone with the money to pay a bribe.

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias

September 19, 2012

*Getting permission to live in Havana
can be a long and difficult process.*

Photo: Alexander Robles



A young man who requested anonymity described how he and his wife moved to Havana from Guantánamo province. They had to pay 100 convertible pesos each – at over 100 dollars and 2,500 pesos, it is worth around five months’ average wages in Cuba – to obtain approval for a change in address.

“If we hadn’t done it like that, we wouldn’t have been able to complete the change of address,” he said. “If you try to find all the documents that they ask for, you’ll never finish. It will prove more expensive, anyway. Also, neither of us has any family here.”

The young man explained how the deceit worked.

“The housing people look for someone here in Havana who has the same name and surname as your mother or father, and then they make the change [of address] citing that property,” he said.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights –signed although not ratified by Cuba in 2008 – both guarantee the right to free movement within a country’s borders.

Applications for licenses to build a new structure or modify an existing one, present similar challenges.

Article 15 of Cuba’s General Housing Law says a building permit from the relevant municipal housing department is needed for “the construction, remodeling and extension of individual homes and apartments, undertaken as a private initiative of their owners.”

Jorge Osorio, a Havana resident in his sixties, described how the permission process really worked. “Since I began building my house, everything has been done illegally with bribes paid over. It would have been impossible to finish it or make it legal any other way,” he said. •

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias
is an independent journalist in Cuba.

DENGUE FEVER SPREADS TO ANOTHER CUBAN PROVINCE

Medical students drafted in to help with health checks in Cienfuegos.

Dozens of suspected dengue fever cases have been reported in hospitals in the Cuban city of Cienfuegos, with 12 confirmed as of September 19.

A correspondent for Jagua Press, an independent news agency in Cienfuegos, said, "On September 18, the waiting rooms of the province's hospitals were full of patients suffering from fever, muscular pain and headaches – all symptoms of dengue fever."

Dengue fever, transmitted by mosquitos, has only just appeared in Cienfuegos, but outbreaks were reported in other regions months ago, according to independent press reports in Cuba. In August, the health ministry was quoted as saying mosquito infestation had reached "critical" level in 23 municipalities, 15 of them in Havana province.

Cuban doctor Annabell Tur says the disease is most harmful to children and the elderly. Initial symptoms include fever, headaches and pain in the joints and muscles. If the infection is not treated in time, it can become severe and ultimately fatal.

The Cienfuegos Provincial Epidemiology Centre has launched a major campaign to fumigate homes and clean up urban areas to eradicate the yellow fever mosquito, which breeds in stagnant water.

Cuban and foreign students from the Havana-based Latin American School of Medicine visited homes in parts of Cienfuegos province, where a red alert has been issued, to check people for symptoms of the disease by taking their temperature and interviewing them.

A young doctor who surveyed residents in Cienfuegos city's Juanita neighborhood said a dozen potential cases were recorded in a nine-block radius there. The doctor, who asked not to be named, said he was aware of cases in two other areas of the city, although he did not know the numbers involved.

He said the health authorities had prepared a ward at the city's Gustavo Aldereguía Lima Hospital to deal with serious cases, while patients who made satisfactory progress would be treated at home.

Alejandro Tur Valladares

October 1, 2012

Cuba's state-run media have remained silent about the outbreak.

Independent journalist Liosvani Alfonso Castillo suspects this reticence is because the high season for foreign tourists has arrived. "If they know there's an epidemic, they won't come," he said. •

*Yellow fever mosquito, the species
that spreads dengue fever.*

Photo: James Gathany/Wikimedia Commons



Alejandro Tur Valladares is a veteran journalist
who collaborates with the news site Cubanet.

SEWAGE TROUBLES IN HAVANA

Cuban capital's drainage systems badly need repairs.

Poor maintenance of drains at an apartment block in central Havana has created a serious health hazard for residents. A maintenance worker says much of the Cuban capital is affected by blocked sewage systems.

Blocked drains at 668 San Martín Road have flooded the sewage tank, polluting the cistern, which stores water for drinking, cooking and bathing.

"When a visitor comes to my home, I feel so embarrassed by the stench they're forced to breathe in. No one can stand it," said a woman who lives on the ground floor of the apartment block, where the hallway is flooded with foul-smelling water.

Other residents say the blocked pipes mean they have to collect their feces in plastic bags and throw them out with the rubbish.

Doctors who have inspected conditions in the building say the 36 people who live there are at risk of cholera, dengue fever and other illnesses. At least two children have been treated for infectious diseases in recent weeks.

Yamilet López Montesino took her 13-year-old daughter to hospital after she fell ill. Medical staff asked about sanitary conditions at her home, and sent a team along to investigate.

"A doctor arrived with people from the Anti-Aegypti [mosquito] Campaign," she said. "On seeing the state of the building, they said they would notify the Sewage Management Company, which is in charge of repairing and maintaining sewage systems."

Another doctor who visited the building said, "When drainage water contaminates the cistern, it exposes people to cholera and hepatitis A – illnesses which, along with dengue fever... are hitting this country hard."

"Hepatitis A is a mild illness, but if it isn't attended properly it can become dangerous. Meanwhile, cholera, dengue, leptospirosis and salmonella can be deadly," the doctor warned, adding that he had observed rat, mosquito and cockroach infestations in the building.

Dengue fever, now common in parts of Latin America, including Cuba, is spread by the yellow fever mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*). In August, the Inter Press Service news agency quoted the Cuban

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias¹²

October 1, 2012



Blocked drain at San Martín 688.

Photo: Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias

12. This article was written by Hablamos Press reporter Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias before his arrest on September 16. He was charged with being disrespectful towards President Raúl Castro and his brother Fidel Castro. See section *Covering a Story: The Imprisonment and Release of Journalist Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias*, pages 94-116.

Public Health Ministry as saying mosquito infestation had reached “critical” level in 23 municipalities across the country.

People living in the area say sewage has been a problem at the apartment block for some years now.

“This isn’t the first time that we’ve been in this position,” said Yureisy Masa Negreg, whose two-year-old-son has been suffering from fever, vomiting and diarrhea. “But it’s been nearly two months now. We have filed complaints with all the government institutions, yet no one is fixing the problem.”

An employee of the state-run Sewage Management Company in the city said he was aware of the issues, but there was little he could do as the blockage was in the sewage mains pipe rather than inside the building.

“We do repairs from the entrance to the interior, while others are responsible for repairs [under] the street. In this building, the flooding is due to a blockage in the [mains] pipe,” he said.

He said similar blockages in drainage pipes now affected more than 60 per cent of Havana residents.

“These sewage systems are very old. Many of them have gone 50 years or more without having the necessary maintenance done,” he said. “The government is making a big effort... but it’s very expensive, and the economic situation means we can’t afford it. Don’t forget that we’re a country under blockade.”

Residents of the apartment block point out that things can be fixed when there is a will to do so.

A burst drain at a shop just 25 meters away was fixed in under 24 hours. The shop, called La Mía, is state-run but rather up-market as it only accepts convertible currency, not normal Cuban pesos.

Meanwhile, residents of the San Martín Road apartments have developed a rota for washing since their own bathroom facilities are out of order.

“We have to bathe in the hallway. We use buckets to collect the water and then throw it into the road,” López said. “The men and children go first, and we women have to wait until late at night. It isn’t easy. When I finish work, I have no wish to come back here.” •



Leaking sewage fills corridors and causes a health hazard for residents.

Photo: Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias

PARENTS REMOVE CHILDREN FROM FILTHY WARDS IN HAVANA

Dengue outbreak tests hospitals as staff struggle to cope.

Hospitals in the Cuban capital Havana are so overburdened by admitting patients with dengue fever that they are failing to maintain basic hygiene, staff and patients' relatives say.

A nurse at one hospital in the city said a shortage of cleaning staff in overcrowded wards set aside for dengue fever cases meant that hygiene standards were not being maintained.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, she said hospitals across Havana were overwhelmed with suspected dengue cases.

"In hospitals like Julio Trigo, Miguel E. Cabreras and Hijas de Galicia, health officials are advising that due to insufficient capacity, only severe cases of dengue should be admitted, with pregnant women and the elderly made the priority," she said.

Epidemiological statistics are kept confidential, so the nurse based her assessment of the scale of the outbreak on her own observations. She said the Arroyo Naranjo municipality, part of Havana city, had the highest recorded incidence of dengue fever infection and also fatalities.

In Arroyo Naranjo, conditions at the Arturo Aballí maternity and pediatric teaching hospital got so bad that parents started taking their children home.

When Vladimir Peña and Yamilé Ortega brought their six-month-old daughter Emily in to the hospital on August 24 with a fever suspected to be dengue, they were shocked at what they found there.

"When we arrived, we found that limited capacity meant Emily had to share a cubicle with confirmed cases," Ortega said.

Peña described "the cubicle and hallway floors covered in rubbish, food, bloodstained dressings and cotton balls, as well as children's vomit and feces. To top it off, the majority of the bathrooms were closed because [the plumbing] was blocked up."

He and other parents repeatedly asked hospital managers to institute a clean-up, but received only "evasive and vague" answers about why the place was in such a state.

Osniel Carmona Breijo

October 17, 2012

"I brought in my four-year-old son to see him get better, not to have him pick up an infection"

"Aside from the inefficiency of it, what was most infuriating was that no one was able to offer a logical explanation as to why our children had to be surrounded by filth," he said.

As their child's fever did not return within 72 hours, the couple decided to take her home on August 29. Nine other sets of parents whose children had suspected rather than confirmed cases followed suit.

One father, Augusto Barbosa, said the unsanitary conditions placed fever-weakened children at greater risk.

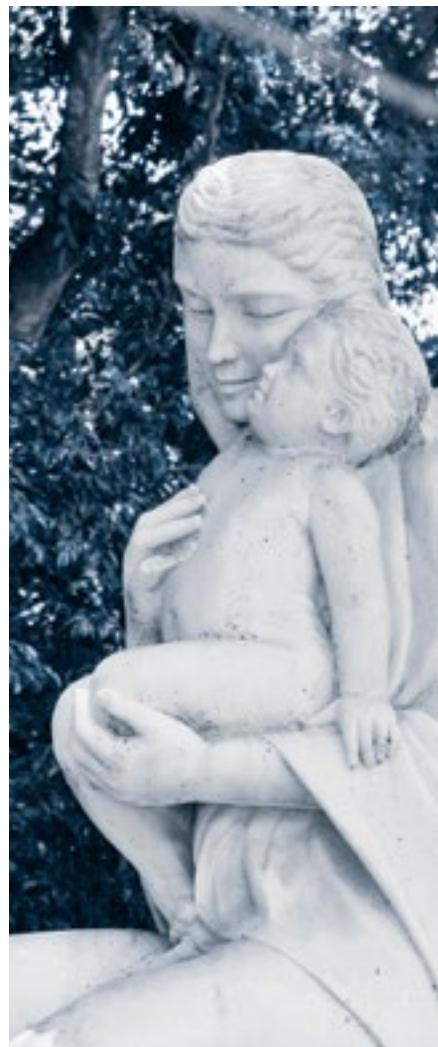
"I brought in my four-year-old son to see him get better, not to have him pick up an infection," he said.

A few days after Peña and Ortega took their daughter home, staff from the teaching hospital and from the health clinic in their neighborhood, Managua, visited them at home. They asked Peña to sign a statement taking responsibility for removing his child from the hospital without the approval of a specialist doctor.

"I refused to sign anything," he said. "I don't consider myself responsible for what happened. Under normal conditions, the girl would have stayed there under observation for the necessary period."

He added, "If I need to go to a hospital again, it won't be the Aballi." •

*Maternity, a sculpture in former Lutgarda Morales Hospital, Villa Clara, Cuba.
Photo: lezumbalaberjenja/Flickr*



Osniel Carmona Breijo is a novice journalist who first started publishing work through this project.

SANITARY TOWEL SHORTAGE IN CUBA

Availability of basic items limited by cumbersome state rationing and distribution system.

Cuban women complain that sanitary towels are frequently unavailable due to inefficiencies in the state system for distributing goods around the country.

Like foodstuffs and other basic items, sanitary towels –known as *íntimas* in Cuba – are on a list of things that people can buy via a rationing system which sets subsidized prices, distribution times and amounts per person.

In the case of *íntimas*, the state-run pharmacy chain handles deliveries and distribution, but in practice, supplies are erratic, with gaps of months at a time.

In the Batabanó municipality in Mayabeque, the province immediately west of the capital Havana, distribution normally happens every three months – but often the consignment is only enough for one month's consumer demand. Customers also complain that packs of *íntimas* are often incomplete and that product quality can be so low as to be virtually unusable.

Local women have filed a number of formal complaints with the Citizens' Advice Bureau attached to Mayabeque's provincial council. Raíza Paredes, who manages a pharmacy in San Antonio de las Vegas, has filed more than 50 such complaints over an eight-year period.

Staff at the Bureau have a stock response that reflects the way officials view state supply systems; the province does not have its own factory manufacturing sanitary towels, and cannot be held responsible for production elsewhere. But within Mayabeque Province, the state distribution network is highly efficient, they say. This kind of answer baffles locals like María Enríquez, a resident of the Sopapo neighborhood.

“Independently of whether there's a factory producing them in the province, it's hard to believe that the government is making a real effort to solve the problem,” she said. “I cannot believe that with all their resources, they cannot guarantee distribution of *íntimas*.”

“Meanwhile, most of the shops run by [self-employed] *cuentapropistas* manage to access large quantities, albeit at higher prices. Which factory do the private enterprises get them from?”

Cuentapropista-run shops sell at higher prices than the rationed state network, so they are only for those who can afford them. So

Osniel Carmona Breijo

October 17, 2012

are the state-run luxury stores which stock imported tampons and towels, but only accept the higher-value convertible peso.

Enríquez says that when sanitary towels are unavailable, she and other women she knows use and reuse boiled cloth.

Some of those hardest hit by the shortages live in slums to which they have moved from other areas, according to a civil servant in Batabanó municipality's Office of Consumer Affairs.

Because they are illegal migrants, these people are denied residence permits and ration books, so women cannot obtain *íntimas* at subsidized rates.

The situation is the same in other provinces.

Carmen Cejas, who lives in the San Luis municipality of Pinar del Río, Cuba's westernmost province, says that outside the provincial capital, all municipalities run short of *íntimas*, while in rural areas, deliveries can take up to six months.

"In the more remote areas, *íntimas* only arrive in communities two or three times a year," she said. "Because of the distances involved and transport issues, getting to the shops where they're on sale is also a big problem."

Cejas said that in the countryside of Pinar del Río, most women use pieces of cheesecloth – a material used to cover tobacco plants – rather than manufactured sanitary towels. •



Women shopping at a state-run pharmacy in Cuba.
Photo: Bitboy/Flickr

HAVANA STREET PARTY ENDS IN FISTFIGHT

Alcohol and shortage of “ideological fervor” ruin festivities staged by neighborhood watch body

As Cuba’s neighborhood watch network celebrated its 52nd anniversary in late September ¹³, the party in one Havana neighborhood came to an abrupt end with a street fight between local residents.

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, CDR, exist everywhere in Cuba, and function as neighborhood bodies tasked both with community work and with sniffing out “counter-revolutionary activity.”

Cuban leader Fidel Castro established CDRs in the year following the 1959 revolution as a way of encouraging citizens to inform on each other. Most Cubans formally register as members of their local CDR.

In Managua, a neighborhood of Havana’s Arroyo Naranjo district, the local CDR’s anniversary party turned nasty when two young people got into an argument, and were joined by friends and relatives.

Residents of Managua’s San Isidro Road said more than 20 people – women as well as men – took part in the street battle.

Eyewitness Leandro Vives said locals and other party guests waded in to try to stop the fight, but then became embroiled in it themselves.

“Suddenly I was trapped in the middle of the fracas. The street was like a hornet’s nest.... I saw a few people hit with bottles and slabs of wood,” he said.

Eight people needed medical attention afterwards, the most serious cases being a man who needed stitches after being hit over the head with a bottle, and another who had a fractured wrist and a large cut in his shoulder where he was attacked with a broken bottle.

Marta Hevia, mother of a 16-year-old who was injured in the fight, said the police only turned up when the dust had settled, even though their station is less than 100 meters away from where the battle took place.

“They’re always late. They only turn up when it’s time to gather up the wounded,” she said. “They concentrate more on going after people who try to sell things to buy food than they do on keeping the peace,” she said.

Police only discovered there was something going on when the Managua Polyclinic phoned them to let them know people were coming in with injuries from a fight.

Osniel Carmona Breijo

October 23, 2012

13. See *Cuba’s Neighborhood Watch Committees Lose Impetus*, page 42.

With the help of CDR head Lázaro Báez, police identified and detained the major culprits.

Four men were fined 500 pesos each, a sum that although equivalent to just 20 US dollars is more than the average Cuban earns in a month. Others were charged with public disorder and fined 30 pesos each. All those charged were banned from taking part in future festivities.

Báez said the celebrations held by CDRs in Cuba were no longer what they used to be – the “fervor of political ideology” was long gone.

“People just go... to dance and drink,” he said ruefully. As a result, he said, this was the second year the Managua party had ended in a fight. •



"CDRs Against Unlawfulness".

Photo: Amycgx/Flickr

HURRICANE SANDY EXPOSES CUBA'S CRUMBLING INFRASTRUCTURE

"It's not looking good," official said as winds headed for shore.

The devastation caused by the hurricane that hit Cuba in the last week of October was made worse by the poor state of many buildings, according to eyewitnesses.

Hurricane Sandy was the worst natural disaster to strike Cuba in half a century.

As the hurricane raced towards shore, Lázaro Expósito Canto, head of the Provincial Defense Council in Santiago de Cuba, made a last-minute announcement on television and radio.

"It's not looking good. Citizens whose homes are in poor condition should take precautions and all necessary steps to avoid loss of life," he said.

By the time he issued this warning, it was too late for many people in Santiago de Cuba province to hear it, as the electricity had gone off.

After the hurricane raged overnight on October 25-26, preliminary estimates of the damage to property were reported in Cuba's youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde – over 4,200 homes had collapsed, 27,000 had lost their roofs entirely and 17,000 had damaged roofs.

These numbers were for the province excluding its main urban center, also called Santiago de Cuba. The damage to this city, the second-largest after the capital Havana, was significant, and residents said the infrastructure was ill-prepared for the battering it received. In the city's Chicharrones neighborhood, which President Raúl Castro visited after the hurricane, housewife Marién described her frightening experience.

"In the middle of the night, the roof of my house was blown off by strong winds. Thanks to the support of a neighbor... I was evacuated along with my children, husband and other neighbors in the mist of the cyclone," she said. "By the morning, everything had been destroyed, houses flattened, and lots of people were crying as they'd lost everything they owned."

Another woman, Margot, who lives in the city's Antonio Maceo neighborhood, believes casualties would have been much reduced if the authorities had "informed people properly" ahead of the

Reporters in Cuba

November 20, 2012



Some residents say more could have been done to avert damage.

Photo: Reynier Vera Martínez

hurricane, and provided places of shelter for “at least those people who had serious problems with their housing.”

Before the winds hit, she said, “Municipal workers didn’t clean the drains to prevent flooding and didn’t cut down trees to prevent them... knocking down houses and obstructing roads.”

Local observers reported cases of looting in the aftermath of the hurricane.

“The Ideal Marby market... in the city center was ransacked because the shop windows were broken by tree branches,” Margot said.

Another resident, Carlos Manuel Fuentes, described how the Hotel Bucanero was plundered.

“Many people had grown desperate because the town’s store-rooms had disappeared. They took advantage of the security guards and other hotel staff abandoning the flooded building and invaded it to take provisions like ham, cheese and meat,” he said, adding that he saw “computers, printers and other equipment buried in the sand, and people digging them out in hope of fixing them.”

So far, the Cuban government has not said how much it will cost to revive areas affected by Sandy.

A spokesperson for the United Nations’ World Food Program (WFP), Elisabeth Byrs, described Hurricane Sandy as the “most devastating catastrophe Cuba has experienced in the last 50 years.”

“A million people have been affected, representing ten per cent of the country’s population,” she said on November 6. WFP said food rations were needed for more than 500,000 Cubans. •



*Hurricane Sandy left wreckage in its wake in Santiago de Cuba.
Photo: Reynier Vera Martínez*

This article is based on material provided by Leannes Imbert Acosta, Reynier Vera Martínez and Frank Abel García.

CUBA'S FLOATING EMIGRANTS

Cubans leave on homemade craft despite risk of interception or drowning.

Hundreds of Cubans have been sent back to their country in recent months by United States Coast Guards and Mexican officials. Many are undeterred and say they will make further attempts to sail away to freedom.

The balseros, named after the homemade "balsa" or raft that many build, head for the United States, Mexico or Central American states. The boats are often overloaded and unseaworthy, and far from all make it to shore.

A conscript serving in the Cuban border guards service says about 250 balseros were arrested at sea between July and October this year – some of them by his colleagues and others by the US Coast Guard.

Since 1995, the Coast Guard has implemented a policy known as "wet feet, dry feet", under which Cubans who actually make it onto American soil can remain and apply for permanent residence. Those intercepted at sea – with "wet feet" – are returned to Cuba.

On November 1, the Coast Guard repatriated 32 people whom it picked up from two boats within a couple of days of each other in mid-October.

In Mexico, the National Institute for Migration says 264 Cubans were sent back home in the first nine months of this year.

Pedro Luis Hernández is a veteran balsero with 11 failed attempts behind him. At any hour of the day, he says, "someone, somewhere on the coast is making an attempt to leave the country illegally."

"Sailing 140 kilometers north [to Florida] to an uncertain fate, at the mercy of waves and hungry sharks... is nothing compared to hanging around the streets watching your youth go by," he said. "A shark might not be trying to bite you here, but the [police] unit chief will."

David Alonso, another balsero who has made repeated attempts to get to Florida, says it makes a big difference who catches you. He says the US officers are bound to ensure "respect and protection for repatriates," whereas their Cuban counterparts handcuffed him, insulted him and threatened him with jail unless he told them where he sailed from and who helped him.

Once balseros have been intercepted by either Cuban or US coast guards, they are handed over to the Department for State

Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo

November 27, 2012

In the Florida Strait, a cargo ship discovered six Cuban on a self-made raft that have been on it for 10 days and had already completely run out of water.

Photo: Niklas-B/Flickr



Security and taken for interrogation to the Tricornia Military Unit in the Habana del Este municipality, in Havana province.

According to Alonso, the experience is not as bad as the fine that follows.

"When you're repatriated, the risk of going to jail... is very remote. There's some shouting and insults from the Department of State Security designed to provoke you, but even then you feel safe," he said. "Three months later, all of us [who had been arrested] received a fine of 3,000 pesos [120 dollars or six months of average wage] that we had to pay within a month."

René López, an independent lawyer who runs a legal consultancy in Havana, explains that under a government order issued in 1999, such fines are imposed not for illegal emigration, but for sailing without license and building a vessel illegally.

A port authority official who gave his first name as Alfredo said permits were not available for boat construction or navigation. Questioned further on the subject, he said angrily that the decisions of the Cuban Revolution must not be questioned.

Alonso said he would make further attempts to leave by boat, since he could be imprisoned if he does not pay his last fine.

"I have no chance of getting employment because I'm not 'trustworthy,' and I can't pay the fine. I'd rather die in the attempt to reach the land of freedom than spend four years in jail." •

*Six Cuban rescued by a cargo ship were hand over to a US Coast Guard.
Photo: Niklas-B/flickr*



Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo is a photojournalist with the Hablemos Press Information Centre.

DISEASE SPREADS IN POST-HURRICANE CUBA

Government says nothing about reported cases of dengue fever and cholera.

A month after Hurricane Sandy hit Cuba, outbreaks of cholera and dengue fever have been reported in eastern parts of the country.

The high winds and rain caused massive flooding¹⁴. Standing water is an ideal breeding-ground for cholera – an intestinal disease transmitted by contaminated liquid and food – and for the mosquitoes that carry dengue fever.

In three provinces – Santiago de Cuba, Las Tunas and Guantánamo – residents say some municipalities have been placed under quarantine.

“The Ministry of Public Health is here in Guantánamo because it placed the La Tinta community under quarantine three days ago, following a new outbreak of cholera,” Juan Luis Bravo Rodríguez, a correspondent for the Hablemos Press Information Centre in Guantánamo City, said on November 16.

A health ministry employee interviewed by Bravo Rodríguez said 206 cholera cases had been recorded in the province and more than 100 serious cases of dengue fever.

Niobe García, who lives in Guantánamo province, said some communities in the Himias and San Antonio del Sur municipalities were also under quarantine.

The health authorities have not yet acknowledged the outbreaks.

The official newspaper Granma reported that Public Health Minister Roberto Morales Ojeda told a November 22 meeting in Holguín province, also in the east, that water quality needed to be maintained to avoid dengue fever taking hold. However, he did not say that cases of either disease had been recorded.

On October 30, five days after the hurricane struck Cuba, the Pan-American Health Organization warned that the damage to sanitation systems could cause problems “in areas previously affected by cholera and other illnesses related to water use and the handling of food.”

Human rights activist Mayelín Isaac said her investigations showed that there were at least 50 cholera patients in the Ambrosio Grillo Hospital in Santiago de Cuba.

Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez

November 28, 2012



Flimsy homes suffered particularly when Hurricane Sandy hit Cuba.

Photo: Reynier Vera Martínez

14. See *Hurricane Sandy Exposes Cuba’s Crumbling Infrastructure*, page 154.

In addition, she found that there had been more than 200 confirmed cases in the province's La Maya and San Luis communities in recent weeks.

Residents of Las Tunas, Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo and Granma provinces say doctors and other health workers are actively inspecting houses and heavily populated areas to curb the diseases.

García said checks for mosquito larvae had resumed in Guantánamo after a 15-day break. "They are putting containers of bleach and soap in some schools, workplaces and shops so that people will wash their hands. It's the only measure they've taken so far."

In Granma Province, local resident Maikel Pérez said more active measures were being taken to combat the mosquitos that carry dengue fever.

"Here in Bayamo they're fumigating using light aircraft and vehicles. They're saying on the radio that you should cover your mouth if you're asthmatic. They want to eliminate the mosquito breeding grounds," he said, adding, "There are lots of cases of dengue and cholera; there are three cases here in the city."

One eyewitness spoke of how police and security-service officers are guarding infectious disease wards at clinics and hospitals to prevent news of the scale of infection leaking out.

After visiting his wife at the Ernesto Guevara Hospital in Las Tunas, Livan Monteagudo Rivero said, "The serious cases are taken to the observation ward in Guevara [hospital], where there are more than 20 cases. They post a police or security officer at the door to the ward so that no one can enter and leave with information." •



*Authorities fumigate cars to avoid spread of Dengue.
Photo: Alexander Robles*

Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez is an independent journalist and founder of the Hablemos Press news agency in Cuba.

CHOLERA CONTROLS EXTEND TO CUBAN CAPITAL

Precautions in place in Havana's old town.

Arise in cholera cases in the Cuban capital Havana is being traced back to parts of the country worst affected by Hurricane Sandy two months ago.

Doctors who have recorded new cases of the disease during house-to-house inspections say the Ministry of Health has declared a state of alert in the Jesús María and Belén communities of Habana Vieja municipality.

Habana Vieja – Old Havana – is a popular tourist area in the city center.

“They’ve found 47 cases in Habana Vieja municipality,” said a doctor, who requested anonymity. “Thirty-three of them originate from the eastern provinces.”

The implication is that the individuals carrying cholera may have contracted it in Cuba’s eastern regions as a result of the flooding caused by Hurricane Sandy in late October.¹⁵

The authorities have taken steps to address the new cases in Havana by setting up specialist hospital wards, cleaning up streets and buildings in the Jesús María and Belén communities, and distributing medicines that prevent dehydration.

Health staff have been driving around Old Havana issuing notifications by loudspeaker, telling people what precautions to take, urging them not to try to cure themselves and announcing training sessions where medical staff will be taught how to contain the “epidemic.”

The authorities are also taking action to stop sales of food that fall short of health and hygiene standards, according to a health worker involved in the cholera identification and public information campaign in Habana Vieja municipality.

All the same, the health worker said, he feared “rising numbers of cases.”

A local doctor said he suspected the government was holding off on officially announcing a cholera outbreak because it might deter tourists from visiting Havana’s old town.

In eastern Cuba, the authorities are continuing to take steps to deal with cholera. In Holguín province, doctors at the Vladimir

Reporters in Cuba
December 24, 2012



Bowls with water and chlorine placed at the entrance of a store.
Photo: Hablemos Press

15. See *Disease Spreads in Post-Hurricane Cuba*, page 162.

Lenin Hospital say they are admitting three to five new cases a day. The rising incidence is a cause for concern for Holguín residents like Efraín Méndez, who says that while the health authorities are acting to curb the spread of cholera, they are not providing enough information to the public.

Méndez said the authorities had placed two of Holguín's municipalities, Mayari and Moa, under quarantine because of the number of cholera sufferers in need of medical help. They were also imposing large fines on black-market traders in seafood and vegetables, as substandard products can help the disease spread. •

"Wash your hands in bleach to prevent spread of cholera."

Photo: Susan Sermoneta/Flickr



Information provided by Hablemos Press
and independent journalist Lisbán Hernández.





THOUSANDS ATTEND CUBAN PILGRIMAGE

Shrine of St Lazarus focus of uniquely Cuban festival.

Tens of thousands of Cubans flocked to the shrine of St Lazarus near the capital Havana for the annual pilgrimage last month. Some barefoot, some crawling along the ground, pilgrims of all ages headed for the shrine at a church in El Rincón, 30 kilometers southeast of Havana, in honor of the saint they call San Lázaro, whose holy day is on December 17. They prayed mainly for health and prosperity.

"It's a different atmosphere – you breathe in love and reconciliation," said Mario Corelli, an Italian tourist who has attended the San Lázaro event several times. "Everyone wants to enjoy the grace of San Lázaro."

Observers said numbers were down on previous years, but so were the figures for serious casualties that sometimes accompany such mass events.

A Red Cross paramedic on standby for any medical emergencies said at least 30,000 people attended on December 16-17. Nevertheless, he said, the number of pilgrims was falling year by year.

"I've been working as a paramedic on the San Lázaro days for ten years now. Five years ago, I remember that there were more than 50,000 people, but more recently the numbers have gone down considerably," he said.

On the positive side, the paramedic said there were no reports of deaths this year, always a risk because of the grueling hardships which pilgrims put themselves through. Some drag themselves along the ground or tie heavy weights to their feet.

After hostility from the atheist Communist government in the early years after the Cuban Revolution, Roman Catholicism has come to enjoy greater tolerance. Pope Benedict XVI met top political leaders when he visited Cuba last March.

Respect for San Lázaro is a peculiarly Cuban affair – here the Christian saint has a folk association with Babalú Ayé, a figure from the Santería faith of African origin. As a cultural event, the pilgrimage appeals to a wider audience than devout Catholics.

This year, the authorities helped out with food and transport arrangements. They also deployed large numbers of police to protect participants from the gangs of pickpockets and muggers who prey on them.

Osniel Carmona Breijo

January 3, 2013

Street venders did a brisk trade in food, flowers and religious items among the crowds.

"I've earned more in these two days than in the last month," said one trader in religious handicraft items. "Millions of thanks to my blessed San Lázaro." •

A pilgrim heads slowly for the St Lazarus shrine near Havana.

Photo: Walfrido Lopez Rodriguez/Flickr



CUBANS REVIVE DOLL-BURNING TRADITION

Old customs which the Communist regime once frowned on are making reappearance.

On New Year's Eve, life-sized dolls dressed in old clothes appeared on the streets and squares of Cuba, and were set on fire as the clock struck 12.

In parts of Latin America, the burning of handmade dolls known as "*monigotes*" represents the end of one year and the start of a new one. Onlookers jeer at the burning effigies.

"This is the third year I've made a *monigote*," said Julio, a pensioner in La Juanita neighborhood in Cienfuegos. "The whole block has fun and takes part in making my dolls."

He believes his creations are contributing to "rescuing a tradition that was being lost."

In Cuba, the New Year *monigote* custom came close to dying out in the early years after the 1959 Revolution.

"The tradition was widespread until 1959. After Fidel Castro came to power... the burning of dolls was branded as a bourgeois fraud," independent journalist Clemente Álvarez Díaz recalls. More recently, he says, "Folklore has made a comeback."

Álvarez Díaz links the rebirth of nearly forgotten customs to the erosion of government controls and communist ideology, which he dates back to the 1990s.

The dolls often have signs hung round their necks – some humorous, others regretting the passing of another year.

Occasionally the messages contain barbed comments about the regime. One *monigote* in La Juanita, for example, bore the initials "PNR" – a reference to Cuba's National Revolutionary Police.

In the Palmira municipality, part of Cienfuegos Province, another doll had a ration book sticking out of his shirt pocket. The books are used to distribute state-subsidized food and other items. Rations have been scaled down for years. •

Alejandro Tur Valladares

January 15, 2013



Dolls dressed up in old clothes await New Year's Eve, when they will be burned to ashes.

Photo: Alejandro Tur Valladares

FOREIGN TOURISTS TARGETED BY HAVANA'S MALE PROSTITUTES

For some young men, the sex trade offers an income unavailable in the rest of the cash-strapped economy.

Carlos Triana dropped out of school when he was about 15 and became a male prostitute in Vedado, a tourist area of Havana.

His family was too poor to buy him shoes or provide food for the school day. "On top of that, I had to put up with being insulted and reviled for being gay," he said.

So instead he took to leading a double life, pretending to his family that he was still going to school.

"I left really early in the morning and spent all day walking all the way up and down Road 23, trying to pick up a *yuma* [foreigner]," Triana said. "At the beginning, I found it difficult, but now I'm used to it and I always get clients who pay me more than 50 CUC."

CUC are "convertible pesos," a second, more valuable currency valued one-to-one with the United States dollar.

He met his partner, Héctor Bermudez, through the sex trade.

Bermudez became involved because he had to support his disabled mother and his school-age brother.

"My mother had an accident and lost a leg, and soon after that, my dad abandoned us. I wasn't old enough to work legally, so no one wanted to employ me," he said.

After the 1959 Revolution, the new Communist authorities made every effort to eradicate prostitution. The revival in the sex trade dates from the early 1990s, when Soviet economic assistance dried up and the tourist industry started to take off.

The female prostitutes known as "*jineteras*" who target foreign tourists have been joined by men known as "*pingueros*," who frequent an area known as "La Fuente" between Road 23 and Malecón in Vedado, where Havana's most famous hotels are located. They seek out foreigners, charging them between 20 and 50 convertible pesos.

Some *pingueros* have come out as homosexual, while others insist they are heterosexual.

Osniel Carmona Breijo
and Reynier Vera Martínez
January 23, 2013

"It's an easy way to get cash. It's nearly a job... I don't enjoy it."

As the stories of Triana and Bermudez show, poverty is one of the factors driving young men as well as women to become sex workers.

One young man, who gave his name as Roco, said that initially he became a *pinguero* because he needed the money, but he has carried on so that he can afford to take girlfriends out.

"It's an easy way to get cash. It's nearly a job," he said. "I don't enjoy it."

A Havana lawyer said prostitutes of both sexes could expect to be picked up by police.

"Young people who prostitute themselves are initially issued with written warnings by the National Revolutionary Police," the lawyer explained, noting that on subsequent occasions, "they can be charged with the penal code crime of harassing tourists, which is punishable by one to four years in a minimum-security jail."

Amalia Girón, now 43, has been in the sex trade since she was 16, and was given a three-year prison term for it in 1998.

She says she has never seen so many adolescent sex workers as there are now.

"Five years ago, you could say these were isolated cases. Now I know various groups of [teenage] boys who walk the streets every night and sell sex to solve their money problems," Girón said. "Not all of them share that sexual preference [homosexuality], but they do it out of necessity."

Psychologist Pavel O. Reyes, who has studied the sex trade in Cuba, argues that "on a subconscious level... it has become as institutionalized in people's minds as any ordinary economic activity." •

**Osniel Carmona Breijo and Reynier Vera Martínez
are both independent journalists from Cuba.**



Havana's Malecón district is popular with foreign tourists, and with the sex workers and hustlers who target them.
Photo: Alexander Robles

CRACKS SHOW IN CUBAN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Top facilities only for the elite, while the average patient is treated by overstretched, underpaid doctors in crumbling hospitals.

As Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez receives the best treatment that Cuba's health service can offer, most residents of the country can only dream of similar standards of medical care.

Chávez has been in Cuba since December 9 undergoing treatment for a cancer relapse. He is at CIMEQ, the Medical-Surgical Research Centre, a special hospital set aside for the political elite and foreigners. The facility is located in Havana's Siboney area, home to politicians and top-brass military and close to the embassy district.

Such "foreigners' hospitals," as Cubans call them, cater for health tourists seeking treatment and plastic surgery, and for the elite. An official who requested anonymity said CIMEQ was for senior figures in the Communist Party, government or parliament; the police, intelligence and security agencies; elite scientists and anyone awarded the title "Work Hero" plus their family members.

The official source said Chávez was being treated in a restricted section of the hospital known simply as "Objeto 20."

"The medical technology there is the most advanced in the country, and only government-authorized personnel can enter," he said, adding that if anyone else goes in, "They are immediately ordered out over a loudspeaker, as everything is monitored."

The Cuban government has always stressed that the high standard of healthcare is available to all, not the few. But the facilities made available to Chávez are not open to the likes of Juana Labrada, a farmworker from the San José de las Lajas municipality of Mayabeque Province.

Labrada has been waiting four months for cancer surgery.

"I still haven't received notification," she said. "They've told me the Miguel Enrique Hospital has two infected wards so they can't operate at the moment. They've also said that there aren't [clinical test] reagents."

According to Maritza Martínez, an intensive care specialist in the San Antonio de los Baños municipality, part of Artemisa Province near Havana, long waits are the norm.

Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez

January 28, 2013



The exterior of CIMEQ, a medical institution for the elite.

Photo: CIMEQ/Facebook

"Thousands of Cubans have to wait months for medical treatment, and they often have to resort to bribery to get things done," she said.

She added that the taxes Cubans paid are not reflected either in the quality of care or in healthcare workers' wages.

Contrary to the perceptions fostered by the government, the hospitals that ordinary Cubans go to are generally poorly maintained and short of staff and medicines. That applies even in the capital, where the Calixto García and Miguel Enrique hospitals are in an advanced state of neglect and deterioration.

Inside another Havana institution, the 10 de Octubre teaching hospital, also known as La Dependiente, cracks have opened up in walls left unpainted for years. The floors are stained and surgeries and wards are not disinfected. Doors do not have locks and their frames are coming off. Some bathrooms have no toilets or sinks, and the water supply is erratic. Bat droppings, cockroaches, mosquitos and mice are all in evidence.

Doctors at La Dependiente say the consulting rooms are badly contaminated with bacteria, and there are not enough disinfectants to clean them.

When five Cuban doctors were shown video footage of two wards, one said conditions there were part of "a disaster on a national scale."

All spoke off the record, because open criticism of the health-care system would lead to instant dismissal.

Medical staff are circumspect even with their patients, giving them discreet advice about epidemics whose existence the government denies.

The authorities have yet to acknowledge the spread of cholera and dengue fever. Human rights activists believe outbreaks of the two diseases have taken dozens of lives in Cuba since June 2012. Since both are associated with standing water, cases increased markedly after Hurricane Sandy devastated eastern parts of the country in late October.¹⁶

Doctors are paid poorly – even a specialist gets just over 560 pesos a month, worth less than 25 US dollars and not nearly enough to support a household. As a result, many accept "donations" from their patients.

They are also badly overstretched, a result of the government policy of sending doctors overseas. In recent years, Cuba has sent over 40,000 doctors to 70 countries around the world, and the



A) View of the José Antonio Echevarría room.

B) Condition of the doors at the Echevarría.

C) Toilet at the Enrique Cabrera Hospital.

D) People await for a doctor

E) Healing room at the José Antonio Echevarría.

F) Room Avelino González.

Photos: Gerardo Younel Ávila Perdomo/
Hablemos Press

16. See *Disease Spreads in Post-Hurricane Cuba*, page 162.

TV news is constantly reporting on their achievements in Haiti, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua and elsewhere.

Those left behind struggle to fill the gaps, working long and exhausting shifts for which they are not paid.

As Juana Labrada awaits her operation, she says, "I think I'll have to go to Venezuela to be looked after by Cuban doctors."

In early December, Cuba held its first international conference on public health, attended by delegates and government officials. It was an opportunity to showcase the country's healthcare system. No one stood up to point out the failings. •

Hospitals "for cubans."
Photo: Ann_artant/Flickr



CUBAN VIEWERS PROMISED ENTERTAINING TV

Television executives announce more exciting fare, but revolutionary talk from Venezuela is unlikely to fulfill that hope.

The Venezuelan TV channel TeleSUR is being shown in Cuba as part of a broader rescheduling intended to make state-run television more interesting.

News of the Venezuelan import was announced, together with other changes, in a special program shown on Cuban TV on January 20.

Rafaela Balanza, director of programming on the Education Channel 2, explained that these were “adjustments” intended to make programs “more diverse, more entertaining and more educational.”

TeleSUR is a 24-hour news channel, financed mainly by the Venezuelan government and aimed at a broad Latin American audience. It is transmitted in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Brazil, and is also available on pay TV in other parts of Latin America and in Europe.

Gualdo Ramírez, who represents TeleSUR in Cuba, said it would be broadcast 14 hours a day on Education Channel 2.

He noted that TeleSUR seeks to disseminate the ideas of the Bolivarian Revolution, the movement led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Chávez is currently in Cuba recuperating from cancer treatment.¹⁷

Alejandro Tur Valladares

January 30, 2013

President Hugo Chávez made regular appearances on TeleSUR before his death.
Photo: MLCastle/Flickr



17. See *Cracks Show in Cuban Healthcare System*, page 182.

Ramírez said his channel “expounded a vision of the South and the way that we construct our identity... from an ideological point of view, so as to build a better society which can stand up to the capitalist hegemony which has arrived and expanded throughout the world.”

At the same time as Education Channel 2, other Cuban TV outlets are also shifting focus.

Education Channel 1 will show educational programs in the morning and will carry music from midday onwards. Tele Rebelde will be exclusively for sporting events, Cubavisión will focus on serials and soap operas, and Multivisión will be a film channel.

Aside from the Venezuelan programs, most of the content shown on TV will continue to be produced domestically.

Officials say Round Table, a key program used to explain government policies and criticize dissent both at home and abroad, will continue to be aired.

The show was initially created in 1999 to cover the “Elián affair,” which concerned a boy whose mother died while trying to flee on a homemade raft and who was then claimed by family members in both the United States and Cuba. Once he was back in Cuba and Round Table had served its purpose, the show’s scope broadened to cover other ideological matters.

Cubavisión’s director Victor Torres has acknowledged that some parts of the current schedule get tiny audiences, but he said this “should gradually be eliminated as new programs arrive to fill the gaps.”

Some experts see the changes to programming as an attempt to sustain Cuba’s television output without injecting large sums of money. •



*Venezuela's Telesur channel is to be broadcast on Cuban state television.
Photo: Alejandro Villanueva/Flickr*

EASTERN CUBA HIT BY FOOD SHORTAGES

Since the 2012 hurricane, produce has been brought in from other parts of the country, but transport problems lead to waste.

Foodstuffs are in short supply in Santiago de Cuba Province in the far southeast of Cuba, a legacy of Hurricane Sandy, which raged through the area in October.

The flooding and infrastructure damage caused by the hurricane dealt a grave blow to farmers in eastern Cuba, with large areas under crops wiped out. Fruit and vegetables have had to be brought in to Santiago de Cuba from other provinces, but they are in short supply.

"You can't find anything," local human rights activist Maylín Isaac said. "The state-run markets that should have a supply are empty. Not even the private ones have products. When malanga [a root vegetable also known as eddoe] does turn up, it costs eight pesos a pound and no one can afford it."

According to Arelis Rodríguez, a resident of Santiago de Cuba, "This food deficit has worsened a pre-existing crisis. People are desperate, and the government doesn't seem interested in finding a solution."

Alberto Ramírez, who lives in the Santa Bárbara neighborhood in Santiago de Cuba city, said most people were filling up on rice, though even that was expensive at 11 pesos a kilogram from private traders.

"You can see that wages don't stretch that far," he added. The average wage in Cuba is about 475 pesos a month, around 19 US dollars.

As for fresh produce, Ramírez said, most shops only had oranges that were well past their best.

The flooding increased the incidence of cholera, malaria and dengue fever in eastern Cuba, so the availability of clean water is a pressing concern.

"The drinking water is undrinkable because of the high chlorine level, but that's how you have to drink it," Isaac said. "And now there are food shortages, too."

Officials in Havana, who asked to remain anonymous, said a lot of agricultural produce was spoiled while in storage, because there were not enough vehicles to transport it to provinces that needed it.¹⁸

In Santiago de Cuba itself, local resident Ana Celia Rodríguez Torres, confirmed foodstuffs often went to waste, and were taken either to a local pig farm or to an animal feed factory.

Magaly Norvis Otero Suárez

March 14, 2013



Right: a man sells food in a state shop.

Photo: Néstor/Flickr

18. See *Farm Produce Goes to Waste in Cuba*, page 246.

After the hurricane, eastern Cuba received assistance from a number of countries. Bolivia dispatched 120 tons of food and water to Santiago de Cuba, and Venezuela 150 tons of humanitarian aid goods. But locals say not all of this assistance has been handed out as it should have been.

“Some of the aid was sold to people at very high prices. The tinned Bonito fish sent by Venezuela went on sale at 40 pesos a can, while [construction materials] went to the military reserve forces.” •

State market.

Photo: Rebeca Archondo/Flickr



Magaly Norvis Otero Suárez is a reporter for Hablemos Press, an independent news agency in Cuba.

SQUATTERS TAKE OVER STATE LAND IN CUBA

They hope that after initial warnings, the authorities will relent and give them the land.

Homeless families seized an area of unused land in Cuba's Mayabeque Province last month, saying they had no other option.

Most of the squatters had moved into Mayabeque, a province near the capital Havana, from regions in eastern Cuba. Some were driven out by the destruction that Hurricane Sandy caused in the east in October, while others are just looking for work.

Squatting is not uncommon in Cuba, and is partly a consequence of migratory trends focused on the capital Havana, where people hope to find work and opportunity. The government often ends up recognizing shantytowns like Moliné and El Gavilán, in the city's Arroyo Naranjo and Boyeros municipalities, respectively.

Staying with relatives or in shelters used by farmworkers, the migrants found an area of unused state-owned land in Mayabeque's El Sopapo neighborhood, covered in weeds and rubbish.

Local resident Miguel Lomba described how two families marked out plots of about 15 square meters each, and were followed by more, all using branches to fence off areas identical in size. By March 13, just 48 hours later, 25 plots had been laid out, each with a sign bearing the name of its "owner."

Setting up an informal residents' association, the squatters agreed that everyone would clean up their own plot in preparation for building a home on it.

One of the squatters, Yaudie Cancio, said they made their move after finding out that a local government official had assigned land to someone to start a private business.

"How can they give land to people who have homes so that they can start businesses, when we don't have a roof over our children's heads and we have to live with our relatives?" she asked.

The squatters fully expect the authorities to move against them, but then they are hoping for leniency as in previous cases, officials have first imposed fines and later given the occupants legal rights to remain.

Squatter Evelio Iglesias says three officers from Batabanó municipality have already visited the area and spoken to occupants.

Osniel Carmona Breijo

April 5, 2013

"First we're going to put up a palm roof because it's very likely they will come and knock down whatever we build."

Now the authorities are threatening to close the site down, but Iglesias does not believe that will happen.

"They said they'd send inspectors along to scare us at the end of this month," Iglesias said. "They can go ahead – we aren't afraid. It might work in our favor."

Past practice has been for inspectors to impose an initial fine of 500 pesos – about 20 US dollars. On their second visit, the fine is 100 pesos. Once this formal procedure is out of the way, the process of legalization can begin.

"First we're going to put up a palm roof because it's very likely they will come and knock down whatever we build," said Cancio, who appeared as unperturbed as Iglesias. "Once the situation has been sorted out, then we'll see whether we can make a comfortable home, bit by bit, over a period of time."

Established residents like Lomba are none too happy.

"This is crazy," he said. "They come with axes and pickaxes, cut down a few trees and stick them in the ground to mark out their territory. Then they say that it's theirs now and that no one can remove them. There are more and more of them every day." •

*A Cuban shantytown in Santa Clara.
Photo: Scgtp/Flickr*



HAVANA EVICTIONS HIGHLIGHT HOUSING SHORTAGE

Homeless Cubans squat in disused state properties.

Housing is in such short supply in Cuba that many people end up squatting in public buildings. When local government evicts them, it rarely has alternative accommodation to offer them.

In one recent case, three families were left homeless after they were evicted from a disused health clinic in Alamar, a municipality close to the capital Havana. The evictions took place on April 9.

Aliet Hernández and her three children were among those forcibly removed from the premises by local government officers, police and Communist Party functionaries.

Hernández said she had previously applied for housing assistance, but had been fobbed off by officials who told her to wait and see if her case might be dealt with.

Another of those evicted was Giorgio Rivera Olivera, who is living with HIV. He said he had written to the Cuban parliament and other state institutions about his housing needs but had received no response.

Rivera Olivera is now sleeping in an abandoned bus near the beach at Alamar, while Hernández and her children are sheltering at local bus terminals and hospitals, according to residents of the area.

An official from the local housing department who asked to remain anonymous said there was no accommodation available for those made homeless in the evictions.

The people evicted from the clinic are among an estimated 100,000 people on waiting lists for land plots or housing. Many squat in abandoned public buildings or on the land.¹⁹

The government is aware of the acute housing shortage. In a 2005 report, the state housing agency said Cuba was short of over half a million homes, and in order to fill the gap, it would have to build 80,000 homes annually – a quarter of them in Havana – over a ten-year period. But six years later, the housing deficit was officially put at 600,000 – higher than before.

To reduce the burden on the state, the Cuban authorities now subsidize residents to repair existing homes or build new ones.

Lisbán Hernández Sánchez

May 22, 2013

19. See *Squatters Take Over State Land in Cuba*, page 196.

Although evictions are now quite common, pro-government figures have denied they happen.

On a recent tour of Spain, the deputy head of the Cuban Association of Economists and Accountants, Hugo Pons, told the newspaper *Público* that in Cuba “the word eviction doesn’t exist – not only does it not exist, it isn’t part of the regulatory framework.” In the same article, state journalist Iroel Sánchez insisted “they can’t throw you out of your house. Cubans don’t understand that; it isn’t part of their culture.” •

*Abandoned building in Havana.
Photo: Matthias Sachse*



Lisbán Hernández Sánchez is an independent journalist in Havana and founder of the Giraldilla Information Centre.

CUBANS GET WEB ACCESS, BUT COSTS ARE HIGH

An hour of surfing is worth a week's wages, but authorities promise to cut prices at a later date.

Cubans have welcomed a government initiative to make Internet access more widely available, but they say the high costs will put it beyond the reach of most people.

The new service was rolled out across the country on June 4 via 118 public access points, similar to internet cafes, with few restrictions on what sites users are able to access.

However, one hour's connection costs the equivalent of 4.5 US dollars – a week's salary in a country where the average monthly wage is 475 pesos, about 19 US dollars.

Official announcements say payment has to be in “convertible pesos” or CUC – a parallel currency pegged one-to-one with the US dollar, and separate from the normal peso.

Three types of connection are available – full Internet access at 4.50 CUC an hour, email only at 1.50 CUC and use of Cuba's own intranet network at 0.60 CUC.

Deputy Communications Minister Wilfredo Vidal González told the official newspaper Granma that the high prices would apply until the state telecoms company managed to recover some of the investment it had put into setting up the service, particularly the cost of infrastructure, computers and international connections.

He said the policy would be same as applied to mobile phone use – when overall usage increased, prices would be cut.

For the moment, though, the costs will exclude the majority of potential web surfers.

Edgar Chiong, an electrical engineer who works in a repairs workshop, sees the internet experiment as reminiscent of the time the government made mobile phones, hotel rooms and rental cars accessible to locals – but at impossible prices.

Even so, he said, Cubans were excited by the idea of getting Internet access.

“They haven't internalized the fact that if you can't pay for the service, its existence serves no purpose at all,” he said. “It's another way of exploiting the haves and excluding the have-nots. My salary is 630 pesos [25 US dollars], which is good in comparison with the average. Nevertheless, it isn't enough to feed my family and cover the costs of public transport... so I can't even dream of the Internet.”

Osniel Carmona Breijo

June 21, 2013

Until now, most Cubans have had no way of accessing the internet, apart from in hotels at 6 dollars an hour, or for students at university. Certain businesses, government offices and hospitals also had access, and some foreign embassies allowed some people to use their computers.

At the new centers, connection speeds are a minimum of 512 kilobytes per second, and all computers have USB ports for connecting external storage devices. WiFi access is also available.

Internet users also have access to some websites critical of their government, although the Cubanet news sites and at least ten other blogs and sites are currently blocked.

Aurelio Murcia, a 31-year-old graduate, noted that even though the computer centers were expensive, their arrival was a significant step.

“It’s the first phase, complicated by the [limited] number of points of access and the real potential for using these services. But using this technology, we will soon be up-to-date on key international events in any sphere,” he said.

Murcia said that he was particularly excited about the prospect of web services being extended to private homes, which the authorities have indicated will be possible in future, and also access via mobile phone. •



One of the new public internet access centres in Cuba.

Photo: Nico Cervantes

DIGITAL TV COMES TO CUBA

Viewers doubt new technology will improve content of state-controlled media.

The coming Cuban switchover to digital TV has failed to convince viewers that technical progress will make any difference to the heavily politicized content of programs.

Cuba is to switch over to digital broadcasting by 2021. The new system will be phased in until it is available everywhere, and then the analogue broadcasts will be switched off.

The first trials began in June, with digital decoders distributed to 45,000 homes in the Luyanó and Santos Suárez neighborhoods of the capital Havana. The pilot will be extended to about 60 other neighborhoods in the city over the next few months.

Some viewers involved in the trials have complained that image quality is poor, with frequent freezing.

It is estimated that four out of five homes in Havana have televisions, often ancient Soviet-made sets.

Many Cubans think state TV is dull and lacks the variety and entertainment available on foreign channels, so although satellite and cable television is illegal in Cuba, people risk heavy fines to get access.²⁰

Whether the new technology will bring fresher approaches to programming remains in doubt.

Ana Elena, a psychologist, fears that digital TV will be “the same dog in a different collar.”

“TV will continue to be politicized,” she predicted. •

Carlos Ríos Otero

July 3, 2013



Sub-director from Cuban Television talking about transition to digital broadcast.

Photo: Carlos Ríos Otero

Carlos Ríos Otero is a member of the Press Freedom Association in Cuba.

20. See *Cubans Defy Cable TV Ban*, page 210.

CUBANS DEFY CABLE TV BAN

Illegal satellite dishes and cable networks make for more entertaining viewing than Cuban state TV.

Cable and satellite TV are illegal in Cuba, but its popularity suggests viewers are undeterred by the prospect of large fines.

Vivian, 32, says she is glued to foreign television channels from the start of the afternoon soap operas until the six o'clock news.

At eight in the evening, she sits down again to watch the next round of soaps.

"My husband complains a bit because I don't let him watch the sports and I avoid the kitchen," Vivian said. "Evenings are my favorite, as I watch the soap operas with some friends who can't afford to pay for the service."

Vivian described the variety on foreign TV channels as "fantastic."

"It's worth taking the risk to have a moment for amusement and entertainment," she said.

Although the Cuban government allows tourists and diplomats to watch TV foreign channels, satellite and cable remain illegal for the rest of the population.

An article in the official Granma newspaper made the government's position clear, warning of the "destabilizing and interfering messages" transmitted by cable and satellite stations.

In fact, the most-viewed shows are not about politics; they are drama serials and entertainment shows from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela. The most popular channels are the Spanish-language channels Univisión and Telemundo.

Installing the technology to watch them is illegal but easy enough. There are two basic connection methods. For satellite, a dish has to be fitted, properly aligned, and configured with decoder cards, which are often brought in by Cuban Americans on visits.

Cable TV is also laid on by private operators in the black economy, who source the coaxial cable from public-sector employees with access to it. Then they run the cables through residential blocks, laying them parallel to existing power or phone lines where possible, and even underground along water mains or sewers.

The initial connection fee for cable TV is steep at 250 pesos, which at 10 US dollars is more than half the average monthly wage in Cuba. After that, subscribers pay a weekly charge of 50 pesos.

*Carlos Rodriguez
and Carlos Ríos Otero*
July 3, 2013

Subscriber Mercedes, 35, paid the hefty charges and does not regret it.

"It's expensive, but it's worth it as the official programs are boring and there's little variety," she said.

The risks are high for anyone who is caught. According to the newspaper Granma, two people were given two years in prison for setting up a satellite TV connection.

Javier runs an illegal cable network, and says that users as well as those who install the technology can face punitive fines.

"I have friends who have been fined for illegally distributing foreign television," he said. "The owner of the [receiver] apparatus [which provides the signal] is fined 30,000 pesos [1,200 dollars] plus anything they are suspected of buying with the proceeds – televisions, washing machines, air conditioning... Residents who are caught with cable in their homes are fined 10,000 pesos."

The authorities send teams of workers round to remove illegal satellite and cable equipment. These days, they come with cranes so they can access apartment blocks from the roof, because residents refuse to let them in and shout warnings to their neighbors when they see them coming.

On one occasion, illegal cable installers turned up at an address in Havana's old town area and were shocked to find a police lieutenant sitting in the kitchen. But he told them, "Relax, I'm the one with the dollars; I'm the breadwinner in this house. And you'll be safer here than anywhere else. My partner loves Mexican soaps."

(Names changed or withheld for security reasons.)

*Illegal dish for satellite TV
in Havana.*

Photo: Carlos Rios Otero









CITA
EN

BUSCANDO LA FORMA

Entre la oferta estatal y la demanda real

FINDING THE WAY

Between state supply and true demand





Cuba is undergoing an economic transition. Socialism is giving way to capitalism or a state-controlled “updating of the model”. The fall of the Soviet Union in the early 90s demonstrated Cuba’s high level of dependency when Cuba was left in a “special period” of extreme hardship for its people. The economic transition, along with aid from Cuba’s new ally, Venezuela, is allowing gradual recovery. But these changes have also had an impact on society, as can be observed in the news articles in this section. The ration book doesn’t cover all needs and distribution mechanisms fail regularly, leaving Cubans without basic provisions. Meanwhile, the average salary of 19 US dollars is not enough; much less for buying products sold in CUC, a parallel currency worth 25 times more than the Cuban peso. The new entrepreneurial class, known as cuentapropistas, that came into being with the reforms, is flourishing. However, the lack of a wholesale market to supply businesses means that they often sell goods from the underground economy, which exists largely thanks to bureaucratic corruption.

CUBAN STREET TRADERS PAY OFF OFFICIALS TO SURVIVE

Informal “fines” form part of wider pattern of state corruption.

Street traders in Cuba operate on the margins of an overwhelmingly state-run economy, and because their survival depends on government permits, they are easy targets for extortion.

A new class of self-employed called “cuentapropistas” was allowed to emerge in the early 1990s, as the Cuban government struggled to cope with the collapse of Soviet economic support. They fill various economic niches, including street trading, which are governed by strict regulations designed to restrict the growth of business activity.

Yulio Elizarde is a fairly typical cuentapropista, pushing a barrow of fruit and vegetables through the streets of Havana to sell to passers-by.

Elizarde has been in business since 2010, but says that in the last six months, he has fallen victim to sustained extortion by state inspectors, who take between 50 and 100 pesos from him every week in “fines.” At between two and four US dollars, that might not seem much, but the average Cuban earns only around 475 pesos in a month.

The officials told Elizarde they were required to meet a monthly quota for the fines they imposed.

“They told me that if I accepted the fines without complaint, they would protect me from harassment by other inspectors,” he said.

He complied, as he saw it as the best option if he wanted to carry on trading unhindered.

Another handcart trader, Eliecer Montoya, regrets accepting his unholy arrangement with corrupt inspectors.

“I quickly realized I’d made a mistake – I have all my work documentation in order, and I pay my taxes on time,” he said. “There was no reason for me to accede to blackmail and maintain these parasites through the sweat of my brow.”

He realizes he cannot go back on the deal.

“I’ve argued as hard as I can, but they still come and impose fines. They tell me that if I have a problem with that, I can complain wherever I like, as no one will believe I haven’t committed some infraction,” he said.

Osniel Carmona Breijo

October 26, 2012



Street traders are part of Cuba’s highly restricted private sector.

Photo: Cheeses/Flickr

Montoya is particularly opposed to a regulation banning cuen-tapropista traders from staying in the same place for longer than 45 minutes, and also forbidding any form of cover or awning for their carts.

"It's outrageous that you have to push a metal cart around all day long under the intense tropical sun, without any kind of covering to provide protection," he said. "Too many hours in the sun and your products deteriorate."

Lawyer Armando González says officials who extort money are committing a criminal offence.

"In this case, the inspectors are guilty of bribery. This crime is aggravated when they break their own operational rules in return for a gift," he said. "The courts could punish these inspectors with four to six years in jail."

At the same time, González said, extortion is a "difficult criminal offence to prove, and there are a lot of loopholes."

He added, "Cuentapropistas can [also] be charged with complicity... in the crime of bribery, as they have offered money in exchange for ignoring illegal activities."

Paradoxically, neither Elizarde nor Montoya hold their inspectors wholly to blame for extorting cash from them – they recognize that in the Cuban economy, everyone needs ways of earning some extra cash.

Corruption is endemic across Cuba's public sector, and senior officials talk about it openly. President Raúl Castro has described corruption as one of the "main enemies" facing the socialist system. At the end of September, the state media gave wide coverage to a meeting on "instruments for controlling and preventing administrative corruption." •

Policeman is writing a fine.

Photos: Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo



Osniel Carmona Breijo is a journalist interested in rural Cuba.

FOREIGN MONEY FOR CUBAN SUGAR INDUSTRY

Plans to revive processing and the use of waste to make biomass fuel.

Two foreign-funded projects designed to revive sugar production in Cuba are the first investments of their kind in half a century, and come at a time when this once-powerful industry is at a low ebb.

The weekly newspaper Cinco de Septiembre reports that the Brazilian group Odebrecht and British-based Havana Energy Ltd. signed investment deals with the state sugar enterprise Azcuba during last month's Havana Fair.

In a 60 million US dollar deal, Odebrecht will run the Cinco de Septiembre sugar mill in Cienfuegos Province. The firm is already working in Cuba, on a project to modernize Mariel Port.

Havana Energy's investment focuses not so much on sugar as on the by-products. It will build Cuba's first ever power station fuelled by sugar cane biomass, using waste materials from the Ciro Redondo sugar mill in Ciego de Ávila Province.

Francisco Blanco Sanabria, an independent journalist in Cuba, says the agreements come at a time when the sugar industry is in crisis.

Production in the 2011-12 season stood at a mere 1.5 million tons, a massive fall on the peak of 8.2 million tons achieved in the 1980s.

Alejandro Tur Valladares

December 13, 2012



Foreign investment on sugar
by-products industry.
Photo: Ruurmo/flickr

The decline dates to the early 1990s when the main market for Cuban sugar – the Soviet Union – collapsed. The industry was so reliant on guaranteed sales to its ally that it never tried to look at alternatives or at diversification into areas like ethanol production.

Economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe says that the government restructuring program that followed amounted to dismantling mills and halving the area of sugar cane cultivation. In 1990 there were 156 factories; just over 40 of them survive.

One of them is the Cinco de Septiembre plant, due to be taken over by Odebrecht. It will resume production as the December harvest comes in.

At the Havana Fair, officials blamed the delay in securing foreign investment on the United States' trade embargo.

In place since 1960, the embargo penalizes foreign companies that buy or operate businesses confiscated from American citizens in the years after the Cuban Revolution. The dozens of sugar refineries built by the Cuban state between 1970 and 1990 are not subject to these restrictions. •

Alejandro Tur Valladares founded Jagua Press, an independent news agency based in Cienfuegos province.

FAKE BANKNOTES IN HAVANA

People pay surprisingly little attention to checking whether their change comes in counterfeit notes.

Fake banknotes are circulating in the Cuban capital Havana, but although they are fairly easy to spot, residents pass them from hand to hand with apparent unconcern.

"No one bothers to check whether a banknote is fake," taxi driver Rafael García said. "Just as I will accept it, I'll hand it back to [other] customers."

García said he had no idea where the banknotes came from, adding that the police did not seem to be doing anything about it.

There have been no official announcements about the counterfeit notes, which come in ten and 20-peso denominations.

The fakes are easy to identify on inspection – the ten-peso notes are the right color, but are missing a watermark depicting Cuban revolutionary Celia Sánchez. The 20-pesos are watermarked with the correct image of Camilo Cienfuegos, another revolutionary hero, but are greener than the blue of the originals, and the color runs.

Havana resident Michel López warns, "The day people run into legal trouble is the day they'll start having to take the use of counterfeit money seriously."

He says no one he knows would try to bank a fake banknote that had been passed to them.

According to independent lawyer Laritza Diversent, the mere possession of counterfeit money is punishable with four to ten years' imprisonment.

Gladis Martínez, who works for Metropolitano Bank, says staff receive fake notes from customers very rarely, but when they do, they take it out of circulation, record the ID number of the person who handed it over, and report the case to management.

Another taxi driver, Carlos Torres, says he would only scrutinize a banknote carefully if it was in convertible pesos, a separate, parallel and more valuable currency that is pegged to the US dollar.

"When I get home and count my money, I sometimes realize that some of the ten-peso notes are false," he said. "The next day, they'll be the first ones I hand back to customers." •

Carlos Rodríguez

January 15, 2013



Ten pesos banknote.

Photo: David Sasali/Flickr

Carlos Rodríguez is the pseudonym of an independent journalist based in Havana.

CUBA'S ENTREPRENEURS FLOURISH AGAINST THE ODDS

Self-employed numbers rose ten per cent in 2012.

More and more Cubans are running their own small businesses, generating incomes and helping support the economy. But in a system heavily weighted against them, they struggle to gain a competitive edge.

The self-employed entrepreneurs known as “cuentapropistas” took off in the early 1990s, and they have come to fill various economic niches, running shops, selling goods in the street and driving taxis.

They still operate on the margins of a predominately state-controlled economy, in which the government tries to manage supply and demand by fixing prices and rationing certain basic items.

Under President Raúl Castro, the role of the cuentapropistas has been accorded greater official recognition, forming part of a new economic strategy set out at the last Communist Party congress, held in April 2011.

Since then, the cuentapropista numbers have been on the rise. By November last year, there were close to 400,000 people running their own small businesses, a ten per cent increase on the end of 2011.

Cuentapropistas can earn considerably more than they would on a fixed wage in the public sector. There is plenty of demand, too, as they can offer products and services that the state sector cannot, and also provide an alternative source for those goods that are sold in state shops but often run out.

As shoppers like María González find, the prices charged by private traders can be much higher than in the state shops.

Half a kilogram of black beans that would cost eight pesos in a state store would cost 12 pesos from a cuentapropista, a difference of about 20 US cents. Pork, a popular meat in Cuba, costs a third more from a private seller than from a state shop.

González says prices are high because private traders ultimately source their goods from state suppliers, and then charge a mark-up.

The lack of leeway to set competitive prices reflects the wider difficulties facing any setting up on their own in a state-run economy.

Lawyer Laritza Diversent lists some of the obstacles facing cuentapropistas – they cannot join together to form partnerships,

Carlos Rodríguez

January 21, 2013

Private taxi in Havana.

Photo: Kevin D. Clarke



nor can they seek investment from outside Cuba. Also their transactions and savings are complicated by the existence of two currencies, one the normal Cuban peso whose value is fixed by the state, and a second, convertible peso which is pegged to the US dollar.

In addition, the private sector is tightly regulated, and the numerous bureaucratic regulations with which cuentapropistas must comply offer scope for officials to demand bribes.

"Cuentapropistas complain mainly about the excessive powers of the bodies in charge of regulating their activities," Diversent said.

The self-employed have few rights and are always at risk of being accused of speculative dealing or accumulating capital. Both are crimes in Cuban law, and liable to lead to confiscation of property and earnings.

According to independent economist Espinosa Chepe, Cuba's leaders are still wary of the idea of their citizens building up capital, hence they impose taxes "designed to curb economic growth."

Despite the obstacles facing them, at least some cuentapropistas are content with the deal they get.

Street trader Luis Fernández earns around 130 pesos per day, which works out at over 40,000 a year.

At around 2,000 dollars, that is far more than the average Cuban earns, around 5,700 pesos or 228 dollars a year.

Fernández pays the state about 2,300 pesos a year, all in, for his trading license and social security contributions. He said the license to trade from a handcart was "easy to get," and costs him 40 or 50 pesos a year plus another 40 for other paperwork.

Since wages are so low, Chepe points out that private shops and services are out of reach for large numbers of people. •

Street traders are part of Cuba's growing private sector.

Photo: Devon D. Ewart/Flickr



CUBAN GOVERNMENT TRIALS FUEL REFORM

Since people buy black-market gas to supplement limited state supply, a pilot project will see fuel go on sale legally.

The Cuban authorities are piloting a scheme to allow domestic cooking gas to be sold freely in the shops, instead of distributing it only under the rationing system used for a range of basic goods.

At the moment, people are entitled to two cylinders of liquefied petroleum gas, LPG, a year from the state, paying a subsidized price of around seven pesos, less than one US dollar, for each canister.

As part of the “Energy Revolution” launched in 2006, the government gave each household an electric stove, a rice maker and other cooking equipment, the idea being to wean them off gas.

In tandem, it drastically reduced the number of gas cylinder refills provided under the state rationing scheme to just one every six months, a minimum level designed for times when extreme weather conditions prompt power cuts.

However, householders like Ana González say electricity prices are so high that they use LPG most of the time.

“It’s better to buy a ‘balita’ [cylinder] of gas when [the old one] runs out than to do everything with electricity, like cooking or heating up water for bathing,” she said.

*Carlos Rodríguez and Laura Paz
January 25, 2013*



*The Cuban Government will allow LPG to be sold freely.
Photo: Alexander Robles*

The World Bank estimates that last year, Cubans spent over 160 pesos a month on electricity, more than 30 per cent of the average wage.

The scheduled gas distribution is often delayed, and the six-monthly allocation was never intended to cover constant use in any case.

People therefore resort to buying extra LPG cylinders on the black market at high prices.

Havana resident Elena Álvarez believes the “Energy Revolution” was a failure.

“Because of the government’s brilliant brainwave, people now have to buy a balita of gas at 140 pesos [six dollars],” she said.

Álvarez said a friend who works for the state gas distributor told her that the reduction happened “because there wasn’t the capacity to supply the population.”

The government appears to have realized that its attempt to get people to change their behavior has failed, so it might as well try making gas available at commercial prices.

Deputy Prime Minister Marino Murillo Jorge, who heads an economic and social policy committee has announced that Isla de la Juventud, an island off the coast of mainland Cuba, has been chosen to pilot the project this year.

The authorities will “experiment with free sales of gas in government shops at unsubsidized prices, and without affecting [rationed] quotas,” Murillo said, in remarks quoted by the Juventud Rebelde newspaper.

Head of the Office for Rational Use of Energy, Tatiana Amarán Bogachova, has confirmed that sales of gas on the open market are being piloted.

Alberto López lives next to a gas distribution center in Arroyo Naranjo, part of Havana, and believes that the fuel is not really in short supply; reduced rationing has merely encouraged theft by state employees.

“I see cylinder distribution trucks that are completely full. Every two days they come and restock, but most of it goes on the black market,” López said. •

Carlos Rodríguez and Laura Paz (pseudonyms)
are independent journalists in Cuba.

CUBAN ATHLETES IN RACE TO LEAVE

While some seek better lives abroad, others stay out of a sense of loyalty.

Cuban athletes who leave the country in search of better careers abroad frequently cite a lack of support and poor rewards.

Robertlandy Simón Aties used to captain Cuba's national volleyball team, but resigned after growing disillusioned with the way he was treated as a top sportsman.

After his team came second in the World Volleyball Championship held in Italy in 2010, he managed to persuade the authorities to reward him with a car. But this came only after "wearing myself out with asking," he said – and he was the only player given a car. In addition, he said that players were paid late.

Simón Aties was able to emigrate legally because he had married an Italian, and he now has a three-year contract with a volleyball team in Piacenza.

There are many similar stories. Last June, five members of the national basketball team absconded during a tournament in Puerto Rico.

"I wouldn't criticize an athlete who decides to leave the country to seek a better future," said a young athlete at the Giraldo Córdova Cardín sports training center, who did not want to be named. "Looking forward to years representing a country that isn't your own is more satisfying than representing the country you were born in."

He added, "When I get an opportunity, I'll be going."

The sportsman claimed that team selection for international events was often more about political reliability than ability.

Another young athlete cited the case of runner Dayron Robles, who won the 110 meter hurdles at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. He was then involved in a two-year battle with the Cuban Olympic Committee and the Cuban Sports Institute, over outstanding payments worth 40,000 dollars.

Robles eventually won his case, but the young athletes said that if a big star like that had to fight so hard to get what was due to him, then "What can I hope for?"

Not everyone agrees. One national-level player said he has had opportunities to leave, but he felt he owed it to the Cuban Revolution to stay.

Carlos Rodríguez

January 29, 2013

"I'm not blind. It's true that the government is slow to give you things like a home and a car," he said, "That's because of the blockade imposed by the United States. But in the end, they do give it to you."

As for those who chose to emigrate, he said, "I don't feel bitter about it. It's their decision. The only thing I feel is that they've lost out on an opportunity to represent their roots."

A trainer at the Cerro Pelado College for High-Performance Athletes said he felt his time had been wasted every time an athlete defected from the Cuban team at an international competition.

"I think that's wrong," he said. "They're people who have no love for their country." •

Cuban athlete at the London 2012 Paralympic Games

Photo: Garryknight/Flickr



FAILING FARMS FORCE CUBA TO IMPORT FOOD

Cost of buying in foodstuffs from abroad is a heavy burden on government.

Cuba's agricultural sector continues to underperform, and the authorities have acknowledged the heavy cost of importing food to fill the gap.

Shoppers are only too well aware of the implications, which translate into high retail prices for foodstuffs.

As President Raúl Castro told a cabinet meeting in December, every time the production quota is missed, the cost to the state runs into millions of US dollars.

Official figures show that Cuba spent 1.7 billion dollars on food imports in 2012, up from 1.5 billion in 2010. The projection for 2013 is another 200-million-dollar increase, to 1.9 billion dollars.

Laura Paz
March 5, 2013

Urban orchard.
Photo: Alexander Robles



In early December, state television reported that annual production of beans – a staple item in Cuba – was running at 20,000 tons a year, when consumption was 100,000 tons.

Despite President Castro's focus on raising farm output since 2008, the sector has consistently failed to fulfill the Communist Party's stated plan of growing enough rice, beans, maize, soya and other crops to allow a "gradual reduction of imports."

Pensioner Adela Sotolongo said she would be left penniless if she bought a small joint of pork – an important meat for Cubans – to celebrate Christmas.

For Christmas, she said, "I only just managed to bring home a cabbage, a pound of tomatoes and kidney beans. Prices were too high for my pension."

The cost came to 35 pesos, which may not seem much at 1.30 US dollars, but is a large proportion of her 210 pesos monthly pension.

In December, pork cost 28 pesos a pound (just under half a kilogram). But according to Anabel, a private trader who has her own kiosk, prices are now running at 35 to 40 pesos.

Because food is in short supply at the state-run markets, many shoppers have to buy from private sellers like Anabel, who add a mark-up.

Juan Eye, a street trader in the Arroyo Naranjo municipality of the capital Havana, explained the economics, describing how he bought produce from intermediaries who in turn sourced it from farmers.

"I have to work like a mule and sell beans at high prices, because 220 pounds will cost me 1,700 pesos and I'm only making 200 pesos per sack," he said. •



Left: man ploughs the land for sowing corn.

Right: organic orchard in Viñales.

Photos: Alexander Robles



FARM PRODUCE GOES TO WASTE IN CUBA

In Mayabeque Province, farmers say the government's distribution network is failing them.

As Cuban farms struggle to produce enough food, the state-run storage and distribution systems are often so inefficient that produce goes to waste.

In one recent case in early January, 100 tons of tomatoes were dispatched to pig farms in Melena del Sur in Mayabeque Province, located next to the capital Havana. They had gone rotten in a municipal food collection depot.

One of the drivers who made the deliveries, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the tomatoes were kept too long in poor storage conditions because no transport had been arranged to take them to retail outlets. He blamed the waste on negligent staff at the collection center.

The food collection centers are state-run institutions that provide a distribution network for farms known as "Basic Units for Cooperative Production" or UBPCs.

"The principal function of the collection centers is to amass the produce, then select and pack it for dispatch to markets or the tourist industry," agricultural scientist Rafael Martínez explained. "In many cases, the collection centers also carry out additional functions like providing information on market prices, packaging and providing [space] for selection and packing."

Yoel and Yoan Arocha are among the farmers who supply the collection center in Melena del Sur, and they have lost their tomato crop, worth 50,000 pesos, about 2,000 US dollars.

Others have seen their chili pepper and cabbage crops go to waste. Even when the produce is sold, they say, they do not get paid because the collection center does not have enough money.

Local farmer Pastor Arocha is angry with local government in Melena del Sur for not doing enough to stop the waste, especially in light of "how difficult it is for people to get hold of [foodstuffs], and how expensive they are on the rural market."

As a response to the end of Soviet economic support in the early nineties, Cuba launched a major agrarian reform in 1993, transforming many state farms into the new UBPCs. The idea was

Arian Guerra Pérez

March 5, 2013

A farm producing vegetables.

Photo: Alexander Robles



that farmers would have greater autonomy and more incentives to work as their earnings were now tied to productivity.

There are now almost 2,000 UBPCs across Cuba, but the experiment is not seen as wholehearted success. An article published in the state newspaper Juventud Rebelde in January described them as “the black sheep of Cuban agriculture for nearly 20 years.”

The report noted that the UBPCs held 27 per cent of the country’s arable land, but generated only 11 per cent of the food produced in Cuba.

“Nearly a quarter of their land lies unused,” the article said.

Arocha acknowledged that aside from wastage in the depots, “Many harvests are lost in the fields because there aren’t the implements needed for the work.”

The shortfall in the volume of food produced and delivered to consumers comes at a high price. Cuba’s Economy and Planning Minister Adel Yzquierdo Rodríguez indicates that this year nearly two billion dollars will be spent on importing food, more than in 2012.²¹ •

*Empty fridges in a Havana shop.
Photo: Alexander Robles*



Arian Guerra Pérez is an independent journalist in Mayabeque Province who reports for the Hablemos Press agency.

21. See *Failing Farms Force Cuba to Import Food*, page 242.

HAVANA BUSES BETTER, BUT STILL A WAY TO GO

Problems remain despite government efforts to restore public transport to former efficiency.

Although public transport in the Cuban capital Havana has improved after a five-year investment program, travellers say both the buses and the roads they drive on are in poor shape, and services remain patchy and overcrowded.

Prior to 1990, the average Cuban made over 250 journeys on public transport – including buses, trains and boats – in the course of a year. But the figures dropped dramatically after 1991, when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of economic aid for Cuba resulted in a downturn known as the “special period.”

By 2007, the average number of bus trips per person had fallen to 67 a year.

A five-year plan launched that year set out to get the numbers back to pre-1991 levels.

The government’s statistics office reported that progress was made, so that by 2011 the average number of trips per person had risen to 80 a year.

In Havana, one route that passengers say has improved is the P-10 bus, which covers some 20 kilometers and connects the suburban neighborhoods of Arroyo Naranjo, Boyeros and 10 de Octubre to the embassies, hotels and recreation centers of the Playa municipality. Before 2007, the average wait for a bus on this route was 45 minutes, but now buses pass by every ten to 15 minutes.

Another route, the P-7, which links the suburbs with Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, has been declared a “National Vanguard” – an award the government gives to outstanding people or organizations.

By contrast, the official newspaper Juventud Rebelde reports that the P-1 route only has one bus in service, significantly affecting waiting times. On average, only 400 people will be able to use the bus on each of its eight daily trips.

“There have been improvements, but there’s still a lot to do,” said local resident Lourdes Soler. “Not all the routes meet their timetables.”

As well as the buses, people have other ways of getting around Havana. “Guaguas,” smaller buses carrying up to 50 seated passengers, cost 5 pesos a trip. The government bought a fleet of Yutong buses from China to use as guaguas as part of the five-year plan. Then

Carlos Rodríguez

June 11, 2013

there are “taxi-buses” which charge a fixed price of 1 peso – worth five US cents.

At the higher end are the private taxis or “almendrones,” often American cars from the 1940s and 1950s. A taxi ride from the outskirts of Havana to the city center costs 20 pesos, a little less than a dollar. The average wage in Cuba is approximately 475 pesos a month.

“Transport in the capital has to put up with a lot,” said Ariel Quintana, a self-employed mechanic. “The guaguas aren’t designed to be crammed with people.”

Poorly-maintained roads do not help, either.

“It’s true the roads have been fixed, but the quality of the materials used isn’t the best,” Quintana said. “After a year, the repaired roads already have problems.”

Another mechanic, Lázaro Ruiz, said the buses were kept on the road thanks to the ingenuity of people like him.

“With the help of turners, welders and so on... they avoid a build-up of [broken-down] guaguas at the terminal,” he said.

Ruiz said that because of the United States’ economic sanctions, it was hard to buy replacement parts, “so we’re obliged to mend them.”

Another problem for public transport services is that some passengers avoid paying, and drivers pocket some of the fares they do pay. Even though a trip on the P bus line costs just 0.40 pesos, passengers often drop bits of metal or shreds of banknotes into the collection box instead.

A bus inspector said drivers commonly skimmed off part of the proceeds for themselves when collecting fares.

“Of every 5 pesos that the driver takes into his hand, 3 go into his pocket,” he said.

A traffic policeman who wanted to remain anonymous said that despite the work done on the principal routes, Cuba simply lacked the resources to keep everything in good shape.

In addition “vandalism and the quality of the roads, transport is affected,” he said. “The poor state of the economy means there’s a delay in reviving services.”

In 2007, Juventud Rebelde reported that in the nine months after the Chinese buses were introduced, there had already been 121 stone-throwing incidents, 23 fights on buses, and five assaults on crewmembers.

This bus looks like a conversion from a trailer truck.

Photo: Alexander Robles



Vandalism seems to be a widespread problem. Ricardo López, a 40-year-old resident of the city's Cerro area, said adolescents often threw stones at the buses, breaking windows and injuring the people inside.

A neighbor of his was arrested for this kind of vandalism and, as an adult, received a six-year jail sentence. •

A modern "bendy bus" in Havana.

Photo: Alexander Robles



CUBAN TAXI DRIVERS SEEK ALTERNATIVE FUELS

Vintage cars adapted to run on cheaper stuff than petrol.

Cuba is famous for its “almendrones”, the much-modified classic cars that are used as taxis and are a common sight in the capital Havana.

But high petrol prices are leading cab drivers to find ever-more ingenious ways of adapting their vehicles to run on cheaper types of fuel.

Every time Francisco, a 58-year-old retired army officer, wants to drive his 1952 Chevrolet, he has to start the engine and warm it up for five minutes. When it reaches the right temperature, he shuts off the fuel line feeding it petrol, and switches to kerosene.

Kerosene, or paraffin, is sold for heating and lighting, and Francisco acknowledges that the substance is doing no good to his car’s big engine.

*Carlos Rodríguez and
Odelín Alfonso Torna
July 5, 2013*

*A man fixes an “almendrón”
in a road in Villa Clara.
Photo: Alexander Robles*



“But it’s easy on the wallet,” he said.

On the black market, kerosene sells at 7.50 pesos, 35 US cents, a litre. Normal engine fuels cost far more. The state fuel retailer CUPET sells petrol at between 25 and 35 pesos a litre depending on octane grade, and diesel at 29 pesos a litre.

“I can’t run my business if I buy fuel from CUPET,” taxi driver Armando López, 30, said. The cheapest costs me [25 pesos] and they almost never have any, so I have to buy the standard-grade petrol [29 pesos a litre].”

Petrol is cheaper on the black market.

“Black market petrol costs me 20 pesos, López said.

Most of the “almendrones” date from before 1961, when the United States embargo ended sales of American cars to Communist Cuba.

But these days only the chassis and bodywork are usually original. Some have engines stripped out of Soviet- or Czech-made cars supplied when Cuba was still within Moscow’s orbit, while others are borrowed from European makes.

“Many of them have Mercedes Benz, Fiat or other engines in them,” taxi driver Ángel Giménez said, noting that the replacement engines were less thirsty than the originals.

Some drivers modify their engines to use liquefied petroleum gas, LPG. A standard gas cylinder costing 100 pesos on the black market should give the same mileage as 20 litres of petrol, offering a saving of 300 pesos even on the cheapest petrol.

As with kerosene, the conversion still requires the engine to be started up with a shot of petrol into the adapted carburettor.

Mechanic Rubén Martínez, 44, said that while all fuels carried risks, he had never heard of any accidents occurring with LPG conversions.

“I don’t know about now, but the vehicles that were used to distribute [canister] gas to people in the 1990s ran on [LPG] gas rather than petrol or diesel. We’re talking about an economical fuel here. At this point, I’m unaware of any accident involving [LPG] gas in a car,” Martínez said.

For smaller vehicles, petrol motors from pumps or chainsaws offer a cheap form of power. They have been fitted to small cars, motorcycles and the “rikimbili”, a makeshift powered bicycle or tri-cycle. Rikimbilis are illegal and riders risk having them confiscated by the police.

The same small motors are also used to power the rafts used by Cubans attempting to make the sea crossing to Florida.

Taxi circulates through the Malecón in Havana.

Photo: Alexander Robles



Petrol prices in Cuba rose steeply after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and socialist-bloc aid and subsidies came to an end.

A black-market petrol trader who asked to remain anonymous said he sourced his supplies from government employees, including the interior ministry which controls the police.

He acknowledged that it was a risky business, saying he knew of someone doing two years in prison for trading in fuel.

According to the independent legal information group CubaLex, selling fuel illegally counts as misappropriating state property and carries a sentence of three to eight years.

Communist Party member Ricardo said the reason people stole from the state was that wages were so low.

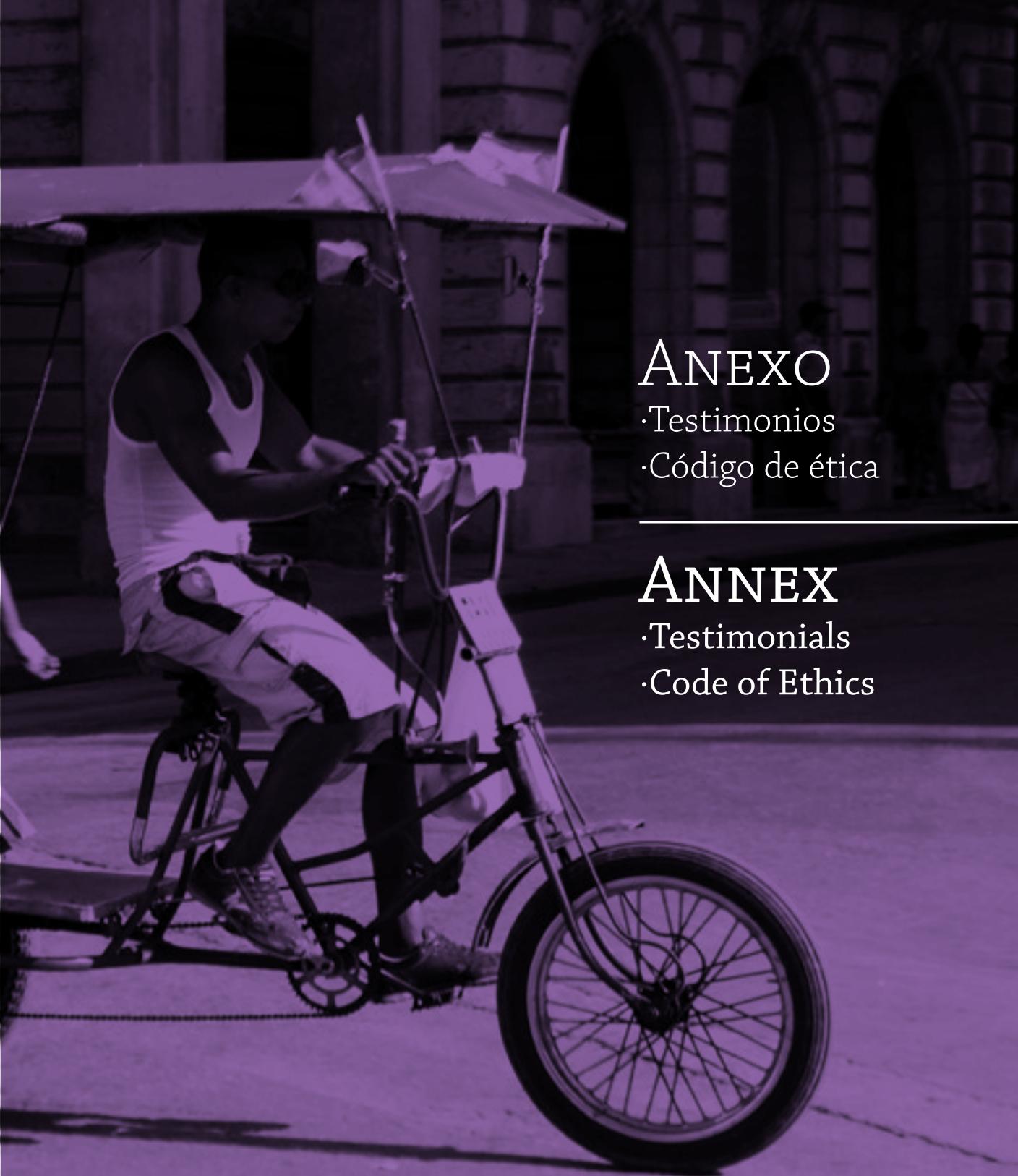
“If Cubans had economic opportunities, a lot of illegality would be avoided,” he said. •

Carlos Rodríguez is the pseudonym of a journalist in Cuba. Odelín Alfonso Torna is an independent journalist reporting from Havana.







A black and white photograph showing a man from the side and slightly from behind. He is wearing a white tank top, light-colored shorts, and sandals. He is riding a bicycle with a large, open-front basket attached to the handlebars. The basket contains several items, possibly goods or supplies. The background shows a brick building and a paved street. The lighting suggests it might be late afternoon or early evening.

ANEXO

- Testimonios
 - Código de ética
-

ANNEX

- Testimonials
- Code of Ethics

TESTIMONIAL

Yaremis Flores

“ **T**here are various factors that distinguish this course from others; the teachers' expertise, attractive educational materials, deep knowledge of the Cuban reality and the marked objective that journalists on the island respect international standards for journalism.

In Cuba, the official press brand independent journalists critical of the government and who write in non-state media, which is illegal in the country, as mediocre liars. They do not respect freedom of expression. Independent reporters are frequently harassed and arbitrarily arrested by the Cuban regime.

The IWPR instructors did not limit themselves to teaching journalism in a schematic way, but used interactive exercises. They demonstrated how international standards are or are not fulfilled in practice, and this is how they ensured that students put concepts and techniques into practice. Personally they helped me to be critical, self-critical and impartial.

The workshops developed my journalistic abilities in general. The high level of correction of my articles showed me how to be a perfectionist and not to settle for what a source tells me, to corroborate what is said and investigate diverse secondary sources, whether they are official or not.

One of the most interesting and useful subjects for me was related to critical thinking and the journalistic mind. The professors were able to provide tools to develop journalistic instinct, distinguish a newsworthy event from one that is not and to define whether or not a news piece will have impact in an international context or not.

Personally this course surpassed my expectations and I took the opportunity to learn everything possible. Distance teaching, far from being an obstacle, promoted learning and the development of the participants.

”

TESTIMONIAL

Roberto De Jesús Guerra Pérez

“ **I** WPR’s distance learning journalism course has been an excellent tool for me.

It has helped my colleagues and I to improve our writing skills and documentation of information, and to learn the basic components necessary for writing news stories that meet international standards.

It has been especially good for me as before reading the manuals, doing the homework, receiving recommendations by the professors and revising my punctuation, I had not produced such in-depth journalistic work applying international standards.

Our editing team has greatly improved its revision of texts. Not having Internet made it very difficult to find information to provide a balance to articles. Thanks to the recommendations by the teachers we now have several databases to search for information without Internet.

Now our articles are published in English.

The course has contributed greatly to all the efforts made by diverse institutions to promote independent journalism in Cuba.

Therefore, this course should continue because of its importance for Cuba’s civil society.

The teachers’ goal to promote the training of students in favor of a free press based on international standards is one of the courses primary values.

This course has the benefit of being prepared in simple and clear language so that anyone who is interested can learn to write journalistic articles.

Thank you to the teachers and to everyone who has made the course possible. ”

TESTIMONIAL

Laura Paz
Pseudonym

“ **I** am a nurse by profession but have been outside the public health sector for more than a decade. The distance course in journalism opened a new opportunity in my life; it made me a better person and taught me how to unravel our society's problems- truthfully and impartially.

I really enjoyed every workshop and meeting and I learned a lot. The trainers gave classes clearly and were well qualified both ethically and professionally. I followed all the advice given and over time my work improved substantially.

Despite the obstacles imposed by being a mother and housewife, I am happy with what I have achieved with this course, as I had never thought that I would write articles and journalistic reports, much less see them published on such important Spanish language sites for Cuba as well as in other languages. There are still things that I need to polish, for example more immediate and investigative journalism.

I would like to thank all the people who in one way or another have had an impact on my work's success, as well as the journalists who supported and believed in me, and encouraged me to take this course. I know there is still more to learn in a profession that requires daily feedback, but I hope to continue learning to fulfill my goal of helping this and future generations.

”

TESTIMONIAL

Alejandro Tur Valladares

“ **W**hen I was informed that I had been accepted on a journalism course, I had low expectations, I have been a journalist for years and I mistakenly thought that it could not offer me much.

Before this experience, there had been other classes.

These attempts at training and improvement of independent journalism within the island were always well received; they were motivating and contributed something to the correction of bad practices within independent journalism, the child of empiricism and autodidacticism.

Nevertheless, the length of time between meetings, the absence of a personalized method correcting journalists' weaknesses, along with the impossibility of getting feedback, meant that previous classes never completely fulfilled my needs.

This course has been another story. Here we learnt the application and scope of international standards, which the media values the moment an article is published. For the first time we were able to distinguish our strengths and weaknesses and we learnt how to correct our faults.

The course has given me a perspective, which I would not have been able to form on my own. Now I know the impediments that affect independent journalism in Cuba and the real value of concepts such as working with sources and balancing information.

I conclude by giving thanks to the group of friends, who, since we started the course, gave themselves passionately to the attempt to perfect the dignified practice of independent journalism in Cuba.

”

CODE OF ETHICS FOR CUBAN JOURNALISTS

This document is intended to provide a guide for Cuban journalists pursuing journalistic standards in compliance with international norms. It seeks to promote freedom of expression, information and foster responsible, free and uncensored journalism.

Journalists:

- 1.** Accept that our primary responsibility is to uphold and defend the right to freedom of expression, free access to information, and the search for truth through fair, independent and impartial reporting.

In that spirit, we will:

- a) provide the public with information based on hard facts, evidence and reliable sources;*
- b) check all facts and corroborate them at least two independent sources, and when such verification is not possible, make this clear;*
- c) ensure that the overall content of a piece of work does not mislead through a distorting emphasis on certain facts or views, or the omission of relevant information.*

- 2.** Should be unbiased and ensure that the most relevant opinions are represented. We provide space for all voices and avoid prejudice.

- 3.** Should draw a clear distinction between fact and opinion.

- 4.** Should seek the highest level of accuracy in the use of data, facts and quotes. Verbatim quotes are word-for-word, and indirect quotes must not distort the meaning or context of the original.

- 5.** Respect intellectual property. Copying another person's work in whole or in part, without citation, and passing it off as one's own is plagiarism and is a serious offense against the profession. We treat photographs in the same way, purchasing them or ensuring we are licensed to re-use them, and attributing them to their owner.

6. Ensure that photos, videos and audio material are faithful to reality. Any montage or editing will be indicated.

7. Should be aware of the legal implications of their actions, and be willing to assume the consequences.

8. Must not make or cite defamatory remarks in their work. It is essential to have a good knowledge of defamation laws in Cuba and abroad. In any legal case, it will be for the journalist, not the plaintiff, to prove that comments are true.

9. Should take every effort to seek a response from individuals that are accused of something, or may otherwise appear in an unfavourable light.

10. Behave in an open, honest and straightforward manner in obtaining information, and do not exploit informants' vulnerability or their ignorance of the media. We identify ourselves as journalists to our sources, and explain wherever possible how the information they provide will be used.

a) Respect the confidentiality of sources and their wish for all or parts of information they provide not to be published or not to be attributed to them.

b) Remarks made off the record are treated as such, and must not be disclosed in any media. They only will be used as background information as part of a journalistic investigation.

c) Only reveal the identity of unnamed sources when they have given permission, or when maintaining secrecy would have serious consequences for society.

d) Inform readers if a name has been omitted or changed.

e) A decision not to identify ourselves as journalists can only be justified when the information cannot be obtained in any other way, and the public interest outweighs the need for transparency.

11. Inquiries into the private lives of individuals without their prior consent are only justified when the public interest outweighs the individual's legitimate right to privacy.

12. Respect the wishes of the bereaved and of victims of crimes, accidents, natural disasters and their families not to be exposed to media intrusion.

13. Never publish the names of victims of sexual crimes unless they have given explicit consent.

14. Avoid naming or showing images of minors involved in criminal acts, not even by first names, aliases or nicknames.

15. Assume the innocence of any person unless this is proven otherwise by the law. This includes portraying individuals in such a way that others might reasonably assume they are guilty.

16. Do not use offensive language or discriminatory terms referring to gender, sexual preference, race, religion, health conditions, disability etc.

17. Accept the public's right to criticize our work and will respond when that is reasonable and necessary.

18. Take responsibility for errors and ensure that they are rectified and publicly acknowledged in the shortest possible time.

19. Protect the integrity of the profession by not accepting payment, recompense, gifts or benefits of any kind which could affect the veracity of the information. Bribery and extortion are serious offenses against the profession.

20. Will not write about events or cases in which we have personal, economic, family, political or any other interests.

21. Should pay attention to our physical safety – no story is worth paying for with one's life.

22. Have the right to expect adequate payment for our work.

Note: The Code of Ethics is a preliminary version which is in the process of ratification by independent journalists and news agencies. This work is led by the Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa (APLP).



Con voz abierta

Primera edición. Mil ejemplares. Agosto de 2013.

Impreso en México.

With Open Voices

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Printed in Mexico.



Este libro es una colección de noticias de un grupo de periodistas cubanos que culminaron un proceso de formación en los estándares internacionales del periodismo. Cada texto abre una ventana para desvelar las contradicciones de los cambios en que está inmersa la sociedad cubana.

La mirada acuciosa de los periodistas descubre las partes finas de aquello que subyace a lo evidente. Hurgan, consultan fuentes, contrastan, incluyen múltiples voces para mostrar los fenómenos políticos, sociales y económicos que impactan al país. Así como los sucesos que marcan el día a día del cubano de a pie, logros y dificultades.

Cada noticia es una búsqueda permanente por cumplir responsablemente con la labor informativa y una reivindicación del ejercicio pleno de la libertad de expresión con ética y profesionalismo.

La actividad periodística debe enfrentarse a duros retos. Detenciones arbitrarias, encarcelamientos, golpizas... son algunos intentos por detener el ímpetu informativo. Sin embargo, como se muestra aquí, la persistencia de los periodistas sobresale ante cualquier adversidad.

This book is a collection of articles by a group of Cuban journalists who completed a course on the international standards of journalism. Each text opens a window onto the changes and contradictions in which Cuban society is immersed.

A reporter's keen eye reveals the subtleties which lie within the obvious. The journalists dig deep, consult sources, compare information and include multiple voices to demonstrate the political, social and economic phenomena impacting the country, including the struggles and feats of day to day life in Cuba.

Each article is part of an ongoing quest to responsibly fulfill the duty to inform; pursuing the right to freedom of expression with ethics and professionalism.

Reporters in Cuba face tough challenges. Arbitrary arrests, imprisonment and beatings are some of the methods used to impede their determination to inform. However, as shown here, a journalist's tenacity can overcome any adversity.

