



## **THE INDEPENDENT PRESS REFUSES TO REMAIN IN THE DARK**

**March 2006**

**Investigation : Benoît Hervieu**

Reporters Without Borders

Americas desk

5, rue Geoffroy Marie

75009 Paris

Tél : (33) 1 44 83 84 84

Fax : (33) 1 45 23 11 51

E-mail : [americas@rsf.org](mailto:americas@rsf.org)

Web : [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)

# Cuba : March 18, 2003 to March 18, 2006

## Three years after "black spring," the independent press refuses to remain in the dark

On March 18, 2003, an unprecedented wave of repression broke over Cuban dissidents. For three days, ninety opponents of the regime were arrested on grounds that they were "agents of the American enemy." Among them were twenty-seven journalists. Nearly all of them were tried under the "88 Law" of February 1999, which protects the "national independence and economy of Cuba," and were given prison sentences ranging from 14 to 27 years. This "black spring" dealt a heavy blow to Cuba's independent press, which had started to emerge on the island in the early 1990s with the creation of small news agencies. Since the latter's founders and directors who had been thrown in jail, many journalists preferred to give up their profession or opt for a life of exile. Did independent journalism die out in Cuba that day? Three years after the crackdown, Reporters Without Borders wanted to take stock of the situation. Unable to send representatives to Cuba, the organization contacted journalists who were still living on the island, or in exile, members of an agency or freelancers, families of jailed dissidents and media outlets - such as Internet websites, radio stations, and publications - most of whom are based in Miami (the second largest Cuban city in the world, with close to 3 million nationals), Puerto Rico, and Madrid. Although it is difficult at present to estimate the exact number of working journalists in Cuba, and their working conditions are even more precarious in the wake of a new wave of repression that has begun to spread across the country, the unofficial Cuban press has not given up. In fact, it constitutes the top news source on the status of human rights on the island. However, its clandestine situation has forced it to be a press "from the inside for the outside", one nearly inaccessible to those whom it covers on a daily basis.

## A flashback to 1995?

"They locked me up with my optimism for company," said Ricardo González Alfonso one day, after being arrested on March 18, 2003, and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He has been held, along with 20 other colleagues, ever since "black spring." His optimism was especially evident in May 2001, when the Reporters Without Borders' correspondent founded *Manuel Márquez Sterling Society* for the purpose of training independent journalists in a country in which the press is the government's exclusive domain. His optimism surfaced again a year later, when he launched the magazine *De Cuba*, which competed against the news - the only version allowed - issued by the Department of Revolutionary Orientation, which operates under the supervision of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee. This dual initiative undoubtedly hit a cord in an era characterized by a rapidly increasing number of small independent agencies and the emergence of dissident journalism. "The adventure began in 1989,



Elizardo Sánchez

in my house, with my stepbrother Hubert Jérez, when the *Independent Journalist Association of Cuba* was founded, which later became the *Cuban Independent Press Agency (APIC)*, recalled Elizardo Sánchez, President of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) now banned). From that point on, other agencies began to appear."

The worm was already in the apple shortly after the *APIC* was created, in 1992, when two of its founders, Indamiro Restano and Néstor Bager (aka "Octavio") turned out to be State Security Department agents, Cuba's political police.

Another similar case occurred in 1998 when the Cooperative of Independent Journalists was founded by Manuel David Orrio (aka "Miguel"), who was also on the government's payroll. However, the trend was then toward a relative liberalization of the regime, which started to open the immigration floodgates and allowed to emerge, in the hopes of controlling them from the inside, agencies such as *Cuba Press*, created by Raúl Rivero, *Havana Press* or the



Néstor Bager

*Union of Cuban Independent Journalists and Writers (UPECI)*, created in 1995. From 1996 to 1998 notably appeared *Patria*, the *Oriental Free Press Agency (Agencia de Prensa Libre Oriental, APLO)*, *Cuba Verdad*, the *Grupo de Trabajo Decoro*, *Centro Norte*, the *Independent Democracy and Culture Institute*, *Libertad*, *Lux Info Press*, etc., and some 40-odd organizations scattered throughout the island, each boasting a membership of up to 20 journalists. "We estimated that prior to the crackdown of 2003, there were more than 150 working journalists in Cuba. "Black spring" must have cut that number in half," estimated Nancy Pérez-Crespo, manager of the *Nueva Prensa Cubana* website in Miami, which posts online news read over the telephone by some 20 journalists on the island. Since "black spring" and especially now that the country is experiencing a new wave of repression, the exact number of working journalists in Cuba is anyone's guess.



Raúl Rivero

Who are Cuba's journalists and how many are there? "No less than a hundred," affirmed Elizardo Sánchez, who is including "thirteen agencies, eight or nine of which were formed after the crackdown but whose levels of activity



Manuel Vázquez Portal

vary because of Internet censorship." A dissident journalist recalled the participation of "80 independent colleagues" at a Conference on Democratic Transition held on February 23, 2006 in Havana. Manuel Vázquez Portal, who founded the *Grupo de Trabajo Decoro* in 1997, and has been in exile in Miami since May 2005, is taking a much more cautious view: "Black spring of 2003 discouraged a lot of people. I estimate at around 40 the number of them who are still actively employed. The others have given up or chosen exile." Forty journalists was also the estimate shared by Rosa Berre, Vice-President of *Cubanet*, one of the main external dissidence hubs created in 1994 in Miami (see insert). But this figure is restricted to journalists who contribute to this media. The current director of the *UPECI*, Ernesto Roque, suggests "60 truly active journalists," half of whom he thinks are affiliated with the *Asociación Pro-Libertad de Prensa (APLP)* [a press freedom association]. The *APLP* claims to be the first true Cuban press union organization,

MAIN EXTERNAL MEDIA

**Magazines and websites**

- **Cubamet** ([www.cubamet.org](http://www.cubamet.org)) : Founded in 1994, the publishing company *Cubamet* relies on a network of 40 of the island's journalists on the island, 15 of whom are freelancers, and the others scattered among 11 local news agencies. The company claims to receive about 25 briefing notes and equivalent number of opinion columns or feature articles every week, which it selects and publishes on its website in its semimonthly bulletin and its bimonthly magazine. *Cubamet* strives to be non-partisan and to deliver the broadest possible information on Cuban life today in every field of endeavor (politics, society, economy, daily living, human rights, etc.). *Cubamet* is known for being the most reliable source of news originating from the island, and is for its objectivity. The website is trilingual: Spanish, English, and French.

- **Nueva Prensa Cubana** ([www.nuevaprensa.com](http://www.nuevaprensa.com)) : This more militant website is now posting news pieces written by about 20 regular journalists, including six freelancers. It publishes articles dictated by telephone. Focusing primarily on the status of human rights on the island, it consistently provides news updates about imprisoned journalists or victims of repression.

- **Carta de Cuba** : This magazine was first printed in 1996 and the website ([www.cartadecuba.org](http://www.cartadecuba.org)) has existed since 2002. Some 30 island-based journalists contribute to it. Copy and phoned-in articles are first processed and edited in Miami - in an office with four permanent staff members - before being e-mailed to Puerto Rico, where two permanent staff members, including founder Carlos Franquí, manage the publication. The magazine and website alike mainly offer news about the status of human rights and devote considerable space to opinion pieces or political analysis.

- **Payolibre** ([www.payolibre.com](http://www.payolibre.com)) : Some thirty journalists and non-journalists contribute to this website created in 2001, but some of them also submit their articles to other websites. *Payolibre* is entirely dedicated to the status of human rights and offers the benefit of posting updated datasheets on jailed dissidents. *Payolibre* shares some of its contributors with **Bitácora Cubana** ([www.bitacoracubana.com](http://www.bitacoracubana.com)), which offers more general news coverage.

- **Encuentro en la Red** ([www.cubaencuentro.com](http://www.cubaencuentro.com)) : This magazine published quarterly, founded in Madrid in 1996, is devoted to covering Cuban culture, as indicated by its full name, *Encuentro de cultura cubana*. This general-news website primarily publishes columns written by twelve freelance journalists from Havana. As permanent contributors, they write only editorials or opinion pieces. A symbol of dissidence arrested during "black spring," who sought asylum in Madrid, where he has been since April 2005, Raúl Rivero has become a frequent contributor to *Encuentro*. Another noteworthy Miami website is *NetforCuba* ([www.netforcuba.org](http://www.netforcuba.org)).

**Radio stations**

- **Radio Martí** : Founded in 1985, this station is in daily contact with a limited number of journalists (six to ten). A telephone line is permanently available to the island's media. Thanks to its shortwave transmission, this station is the only one that can still be heard in Cuba. It broadcasts two daily news programs on dissidence and the unofficial media.

- **La Poderosa** : Founded in 1989, it has eight correspondents in Cuba, including one freelance journalist and seven members of the Cuban Democracy Movement, in addition to the sixteen permanent staff members in its main office in Miami. For the last six months, the radio station has been offering once a week on Fridays, from 11 p.m. until midnight, a broadcasts featuring the *Carta de Cuba* team.

- **Radio Mambi** : Founded in 1995. This station has had sporadic contact with the island's journalists, but the station operates on an open microphone principle: every dissident journalist therefore has the option of calling in to participate in numerous talk shows listed on the program schedule. Moreover, the permanent staff members pass on briefing notes dictated by telephone from the island and certain articles already published on the websites, particularly *Cubamet*. Two other radio stations (*La Cubanísima* and *Radio Caracol*) have a more limited audience.

explained its co-promoter from Havana. It was founded on May 20, 2004, but most of its directors were forced to go into exile. We started over again on February 27, 2006. Our message is intended for the official press, as well as the one in exile." Ricardo González Alfonso is not the only one to display his optimism, but in Cuba,

optimism has become a means of survival.

The worst of it seemed to have arrived in 2003, and "black spring" has left its mark on us. "At that time, independent Cuban journalism lost its most prominent leaders. Journalists have been left entirely on their own ever since, all the more

# Cuba : March 18, 2003 to March 18, 2006 Three years after "black spring," the independent press refuses to remain in the dark

so because they no longer have a training center of the sort provided by the *Manuel Márquez Sterling Society*," said Manuel Vázquez Portal. The *Grupo de Trabajo Decoro* that he had founded had a membership of fourteen journalists until March 2003, when he, along with Hector Maseda Gutiérrez, Omar Moisés Ruiz Hernández and José Ubaldo Izquierdo Hernández were arrested and sentenced to prison terms of from 16 to 20 years under the "88 Law." Manuel Vázquez Portal was released under a conditional discharge<sup>1</sup> for health reasons on June 23, 2004, but on July 22, 2005, another journalist of the "Grupo," Oscar Mario González Pérez, was arrested by Cuban State Security Department agents just before a dissident demonstration began in front of the French Embassy. Held without a trial ever since, he may also be sentenced to 20 years of penal servitude in the name of the "88 Law," even though the Havana judiciary initially admitted "not to have had any charges against him," before claiming "to have lost the indictment file."



Oscar Mario  
González Pérez

Other agencies have watched their staffs dwindle, or even sometimes disappear. The *Independent journalists Cooperative of Ciego de Ávila (Cooperativa avileña de periodistas independientes, CAPI)*<sup>2</sup> ceased to exist after two of its members, Pedro Argüelles Morán and Pablo Pacheco Ávila were thrown behind bars during "black spring," and each given a 20-year prison sentence in April 2003. The third journalist with the agency fled to the United States. *Libertad*, founded in Las Tunas (eastern Cuba) by José Luis García Paneque, has also seen its staff decreasing since the latter was arrested. "Five journa-



Pablo Pacheco Ávila



José Luis  
García Paneque

lists were working there before the crackdown, but there is only one there now, and he has no telephone!" protested Yamilé Llanes Labrada, the wife of the jailed director. *The Colegio de Periodistas Independientes de Camagüey (Independent Journalists College of Camagüey, CPIC)* news agency lost its director, Normando Hernández González, sentenced in 2003 to 25 years in prison, one of the harshest sentences handed down against a journalist since the one served on Omar Rodríguez Saludes, photographer and director of *Nueva Prensa*<sup>3</sup>, who was given 27 years. As for the *El Mayor* news agency, also based in Camagüey, one of whose founders, Alfredo Manuel Pulido López has been serving a 14-year prison term since "black spring", it sunk in 2004, when its last still-active journalist, Luis Guerra Juvier, was threatened with having his exit visa cancelled if he continued to exercise his profession.



Omar Rodríguez  
Saludes

The "historic" agencies have scarcely fared any better. The UPECI is now functioning with only four writers. *NotiCuba*, which appeared in 2000 with twelve members, now has only three. *Cuba Press*, one of the most important agencies since it was formed in 1995, with close to thirty journalists, today is represented by only one, in Matanzas (western Cuba), while *Havana Press* shrunk from fifteen journalists to six, including one correspondent on Isla de la Juventud (western Cuba). These two agencies are part of the suppliers of information used by *Nueva Prensa Cubana* and *La Voz del Oriente*, established in 2002 in Santiago de Cuba (eastern Cuba) and endowed with a staff of seven people, plus six colleagues from the Camagüey region, which no longer has a branch office, though it still has some journalists. "Lucky", *Cuba Verdad* has lost only two writers, seeing its staff decline from five when it was launched in 1998 until today.

<sup>1</sup> Prison sentence commuted to house arrest

<sup>2</sup> avileño, avileña: of the province or city of Ciego de Ávila (eastern Cuba)

<sup>3</sup> not to be confused with *Nueva Prensa Cubana*

## A new generation

The "subversive Hydra" - decapitated but never dead - is decidedly giving the Castroist regime a hard time. For, despite the repression, independent journalism is still attracting talented candidates. It has even "improved in quality according to one "veteran" and new groups are being formed. Of the eleven agencies currently collaborating with *Cubanet*, four were established after "black spring": *Cubanacán Press* and *Jagua Press* in 2003, *Villa Blanca Press* in August 2005, and, the following September, the *Youth without Censorship (Jóvenes sin Censura)* agency, whose director, Liannis Merino Aguilera, age 21, has already been summoned to State Security Department headquarters in Holguín (eastern Cuba) and ordered to cease her activities on December 29, 2005. In addition to the traditional organizations such as *UPECI*, *Cuba Verdad*, the *Avileña Free Press Agency (APLA)* and *APLO*, *Cubanacán* is frequently cited as being the most productive among the new



Guillermo Fariñas  
Hernández

generation. The agency gained even more notoriety with the recent hunger and thirst strike that current director Guillermo Fariñas Hernández initiated on January 31 in conjunction with a letter sent to Fidel Castro demanding free Internet access for all

Cubans. He is currently hospitalized in critical condition in Santa Clara (province of Villa Clara, in central Cuba), but intends to pursue his fast "until death," if necessary.

"*Cubanacán* was founded on October 10, 2003 by José Ramón Moreno Cruz, now in exile in Miami. We quickly grew from four to ten, then seventeen journalists. None of us had worked in that field before, unlike some of our older colleagues who had left the official press," explained agency member Dioloxys Rodríguez Hurtado, who found refuge, along with his wife Belkis - also from *Cubanacán* - in Paris in May 2005. Isabel Rey Rodríguez, former managing editor of *Cuba Press* for the province of Villa Clara, who also sought asylum in France last October, noted in this regard increasing similarities between the way journalists affiliated with an agency and "self-employed" journalists work. "At first, in *Cuba Press*, the journalists in the provinces of Matanzas, Villa Clara, Cienfuegos and Ciego de Ávila were reporting to the editor-in-chief in Havana. Once a week, or every fifteen

days, I would take the bus to bring my articles and columns. But just before the crackdown, that system was no longer available and we became more self-reliant. We would forward our copies by fax, which became impossible after 2003. At that point we had to dictate everything directly by telephone to Miami, and the nearest phone booth to my home was over eight miles [fourteen kilometers] away, which I would cover by bicycle." Today, very few agencies are still maintaining regular editorial meetings. But the partners of *Nueva Prensa Cubana* have managed it. "Every Monday, I welcome our six colleagues from *Havana Press*. On Wednesdays, journalists from Camagüey call me, and on Fridays I hear from those of *La Voz del Oriente*. But since all of the articles are dictated by phone, the agencies are sending them directly to Miami," clarified Estrella García Rodríguez, the *Havana Press*'s Coordination Manager.

## Seven months without a telephone

Dioloxys and Belkis Rodríguez Hurtado have also had to cover the 186 miles [300 kilometers] separating Santa Clara from Havana to deliver their copy of *Cubanacán* to a proofreader: "At night, in the rear of a truck and without the driver's knowledge," they joked. The trip also allowed them to go to the Permanent Office of American Interests, which places at the disposal of independent journalists and writers registered with its "press and culture" department - "a hundred" (according to one of the Office's managers) - supply items and, more importantly, the means to transmit online, thanks to no less than forty computers connected to the Internet. "There are cybercafés, but they're very expensive, nearly 5 dollars an hour, and dissidents are especially prohibited from using them," stressed Dioloxys Rodríguez Hurtado. These rates have gone up even more since the latter's departure, according to Elizardo Sánchez, who spoke of "15 dollars" for the same surfing time. Since the Web can only be accessed by government officials, the new generation of journalists apparently has no other choice than to surf on the turf of the "supreme enemy." Several embassies contacted by Reporters Without Borders would like to be able to make some technical resources available to members of the independent press, but also

## Cuba : March 18, 2003 to March 18, 2006 Three years after "black spring," the independent press refuses to remain in the dark

complain at the same time about a lack of equipment and the risks of creating additional tension in their relations with Cuban authorities, which leaves the Permanent Office of American Interests. "It is very dangerous for freelance journalists to associate with us, but they know that, and it is their choice to make," an employee at the "Press and Culture" department concluded. "It's not ideal, but in order to have access to the Internet, it is the only solution," deplored one concerned journalist.

"In any case, individuals cannot afford a computer," judiciously pointed out Armando Betancourt, an independent contributor to *Nueva Prensa Cubana* living in Camagüey. "It would have to be purchased one component at a time. A monitor costs 200 convertible pesos, or about the same in dollars. A complete PC goes for 600 dollars and a digital camera, 300 dollars. That's why I have to use a borrowed one. As for printers, their sale is outlawed." For Jaime Leygonier, former political prisoner and independent contributor to *Cubanet*, "this lack of any way to transmit is also causing an ever-growing dependency on external media outlets, particularly in Miami. Demand on their part is strong, especially with regard to information about the status of human rights. We have to send in our copy faster and no longer have any way of controlling our own work." Based in the provinces, Armando Betancourt tries to put things in perspective by further regretting that he cannot go on any news assignment because he does not have a vehicle. Ernesto Roque, director of the *UPECI*, also recalls that "the authorities can use a technical problem at any time as a pretext to cut off your telephone service." I just got a line back after being without it for seven months." Such cut-offs are not just affecting the telephone. Dioloxys Rodríguez Hurtado can smile now about the nights spent editing in the dark: "The best ally of a Cuban journalist is the 'chismosa,' the handmade lamp."

Destitute and constantly watched by the government, mainly by its local committees - the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) - Cuban journalists seem to be as challenged in seeking out and producing information as they are in transmitting it. Juan González Febles, another *Cubanet* and *Radio Martí* contributor, Miami's most popular Cuban radio station, feels that he has resolved part of the problem by not working with an agency. "I

prefer not to affiliate myself with one. It is easier to keep tabs on a group than on a man by himself. The risk of police infiltration is much greater for journalists associated with an agency. That is why I prefer to work on my own, which also makes it easier for me to create a network of informers." This opinion is not shared by all of his freelance colleagues. A contributor to the same media outlets and a native of Havana himself, Juan Carlos Linares barely escaped arrest in 2003. "I was on their list. I've been threatened several times with 20-year jail terms. I haven't been incarcerated, but my neighborhood CDR is always trailing me. All I have to do is meet someone in the street, and they know everything I do or say. That's why my sources are quick to retract themselves. The people I interview, who nearly always insist on anonymity, sometimes come to me to beg me not to publish anything."

Armando Betancourt's efforts are sometimes frustrated when meeting with his sources. "People are so afraid to talk that they don't always show up. Recently I investigated someone's eviction from domicile. I was unable to film anything or obtain direct testimony. It took several days for me to convince the people who had been evicted. I encountered the same resistance from the wife of a man being held at the State Security Department." Jaime Leygonier added, with a resigned look: "The real problem for us is how to get sources and information without harming anyone. This is why I am very often forced to practice self-censorship."

Whether working alone or with a small agency, dissident journalists must settle for concealed informers, give up cross-checking their information and count on their own responsiveness and sense of initiative. "It's not unusual for someone to warn us, like this woman did who had problems with the Santa Clara hospital where she was being treated for religious reasons. It was impossible to confirm this information with the hospital administrator or a policeman. Those who witnessed the event paid me a visit one night, but at a neighbor's home, because mine was under surveillance. What usually happens is that someone discreetly gives us partial information, such as a place. That's what happened to me one day when I had gone out to cover a sting operation by police to impose fines on street vendors," recalled Isabel Rey Rodríguez.

## Headlines on human rights

Juan González Febles, on the other hand, takes on the role of the man in the street. "I go out, I observe, and since I do not have to report to anyone, people find it easier to confide in me."

Fired in 1990 from the Ministry of Sugar, where he was a government official, for having refused to participate in a raid against some opponents, Carlos Ríos Otero rejoined *Havana Press* in 2002. The journalist, who had been trained as an economist and works with *Nueva Prensa Cubana* and *Radio Martí*, still has some connections with his former life. "I still have contacts in the sugar industry. This is fortunate, because that way I can form additional contacts to deal with issues the regime does not want discussed, such as the parallel economy, sugarcane harvesting, pickpocketing, etc."

Neither does Carlos Ríos Otero hesitate to deal with highly controversial subjects such as prison riots or the fate of journalists behind bars. When it comes to these topics, far from following the usual pattern, the sources are known. "With families of dissidents relations can be maintained, and they keep me regularly updated about the situation of their imprisoned loved ones," observed Juan Carlos Linares.

As the director of *NotiCuba*, a contributor to *Radio Martí* and a news columnist for the *Miami Herald*, Ángel Pablo Polanco has publicly made it his editorial policy to give a voice first and foremost to dissidents: "We are less and less able to crosscheck our information. So, to what extent can we trust a bunch of anonymous testimonies? We prefer to reduce our volume of information and provide credible data rather than to discredit ourselves, and along with us, the external media that support us. We therefore provide a platform so that the opposition can be heard, the opinions of those willing to speak on the record." This means families of dissidents, naturally, but also the political parties of the opposition, with whom the small agencies often have connections. At *Lux Info Press*, another *Cubanet* and *Radio Martí* partner that has seven journalists, director Caridad Díaz Beltrán, has opted to follow the same line of action: "We are interested above all in the status of human rights and in the fate of pris-

ners; and sometimes, whenever possible, in the living conditions of workers in Cuba. The most important thing is to know what is happening to political prisoners."»

## Reconciliation through information

If some journalists help to alert the public on crucial human rights issues, others on the island also intend to emphasize the emergence of a civil society in Cuba. Some even go so far as to point out the contradictions between what the government says and what is really going on.



Oscar Espinosa Chepe

Oscar Espinosa Chepe is one of the latter. Arrested during "black spring" and granted a conditional discharge on November 29, 2004 that the Cuban court threatened to withdraw on February 28, the former contributor to *De Cuba*, and *Cubanet*, and columnist with the *Miami Herald* and *La Razón* (Spain), draws on her own experience and expertise. "In view of the censorship and my age, I do not do any reporting, I just write columns. I collect the information supplied by the regime and compare it to what I know about economics and diplomacy." There, too, access to first-hand information, even that originating from official ranks, is nearly impossible since the "88 Law" banned all government officials from speaking publicly and outside of the control of the Department of Revolutionary Orientation.

Like his colleague Juan González Febles, Oscar Espinosa Chepe insists on firmly maintaining his independence, even beyond ideological differences. "I am neither a Communist nor an anti-Communist. I want to believe in the reconciliation of all Cubans." His comment is reminiscent of the one Raúl Rivero made in April 2003, on the day he was sentenced: "I do not conspire, I write." A product of the same generation of veteran journalists, Jaime Leygonier stressed one of the challenges faced by independent journalists: "depoliticizing." "It is very hard to distinguish between sensitive topics and those that are not, because the government politicizes even what does not deserve to be. For example, I write about police abuse or racism in Cuba, a taboo subject. But I'm also interested in the health system, as I am, too, in the Catholic



Church or Freemasonry. Now, these topics are just as risky, because even though the regime has not outlawed religious movements, it is trying to control them just like everything else." If, unlike a dissident fringe embodied by Elizardo Sánchez or Oswaldo Paya - champion of the Christian Liberation Movement - these journalists want to believe in a possible reconciliation as a prelude to a democratic transition, they do not ignore the fact that their objective collides head on with another subject that current events suggest should be in the headlines: corruption. "Since the month of November 2005, the government has been launching an anti-corruption campaign that serves as a pretext for yet another crackdown," warned Carlos Ríos Otero. "It is the independent press's favorite theme right now, and the authorities are finding it difficult to hide a phenomenon that they introduced themselves," agreed *Cuba Verdad's* director, José Antonio Fornaris. Oscar Espinosa Chepe went even further: "Corruption has reached such a peak, and what remains of the Communist ideal is so out of reach, that the regime is initiating a new wave of repression. Its aim is not only to stifle freedom of speech but to terrorize the population. This regime is drifting even closer to fascism."

### A new "black spring"?

Indeed, the crackdowns have resumed with the anti-corruption fight that the government is planning to carry out, and the independent press is once again one of their main targets. The latter had felt the regime's cleavers before last November. First, Cuba has continued to hold its ranking as the second biggest prison for journalists in the world by adding, in 2005, four new names to the list of twenty journalists imprisoned since "black spring." Like Oscar Mario González Pérez, Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, who works for *Nueva Prensa Cubana*, *Payolibre* and *Radio Martí*, and who has also been imprisoned since July 13, 2005 without a trial or any specific charges brought against him by the State Security Department, faces the risk of a 20-year prison sentence for "attacking the national independence and economy of Cuba." On the following August 6, Albert Santiago Du Bouchet



Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez

Fernández, of *Havana Press*, was arrested and sentenced to one year of prison without the possibility of parole for "civil disobedience and resisting arrest." The prison doctor detected a blood clot in his brain, probably the result of being hit on the head during his arrest for which, according to *Cubanet*, he received no medical treatment. Finally, these imprisoned journalists now include a woman: Lamasiel Gutiérrez Romero. Sentenced to seven months of house arrest in August 2005 for a



Lamasiel Gutiérrez Romero

"resisting authorities and civil disobedience," after having been brutally apprehended by the Revolutionary National Police, the contributor to *Nueva Prensa Cubana* was jailed on October 11, 2005 in Mantonegro (near Havana) for having refused to give up her profession. Incarcerated during "black spring," Mario Enrique Mayo Hernández, director of the agency *Félix Varela* in Camagüey, was granted a conditional discharge for health reasons on December 1, 2005. But two other journalists arrested in 2003 and released for the same reason at the end of 2004, are likely to return to prison if they do not abandon their activities: Oscar Espinosa Chepe and Jorge Olivera Castillo. Summoned twice this year to appear before a Havana court, on February 21 and



Jorge Olivera Castillo

March 1, the latter was notified that he was prohibited to leave the capital and obliged to do some "rehabilitative work," in a government agency. A candidate, like Oscar Espinosa Chepe, for emigration, he assured Reporters Without Borders that he would not give in to pressure until they grant him a "white card" (permit to leave Cuba).

Aside from the prisons in which dissidents are exposed to harsh treatment, unhealthy living conditions, diseases and lack of medical care, it is no longer possible to count the abusive convocations, threats of incarceration and home visits from State Security Department agents that freelance journalists have had to endure since the month of November. February 2006 was a particularly eventful month: on the 13th, in Havana, Roberto Santana Rodríguez, a freelance contributor to *Cubanet*, received an order from the political police to stop writing. On the 15th, a capital city court sentenced Reinaldo

Cosado Alén, of *Lux Info Press* to "rehabilitative work without internment" to be done under penalty of prison, because of a 1,000-euro fine that had allegedly not been paid for ten years! Two days later, Oscar Sánchez Madán, another freelance contributor of *Cubamet* and *Radio Martí* was brutally beaten by a member of a Havana CDR who had already assaulted him twice in January. On the 19th, an officer of the State Security Department and two CDR agents raided the apartment of Gilberto Manuel González Delgado, of *Noti Libre*, to confiscate his typewriter and his documents. Finally, the next day, the government banned the sale of the foreign publications - *Hola !*, *Mecánica popular* [*Popular Mechanics*], *Muy interesante* and even the daily *El País* - which were deemed "ideologically dangerous," and the distribution of which had until then been limited to hotels for tourists. Estrella García Rodríguez, of *Havana Press*, stresses the oppressiveness of the current climate: "We know that we are always being watched, but we don't see it." Could Ricardo González Alfonso's optimism survive a second "black spring"? Because that is what journalists must do: survive like the rest of the population.

## Wall of sound, wall of money

Is attempting to preserve independent journalism in Cuba a masochistic enterprise? Everything seems to suggest it, given that the risks incurred offer so little reward, in two respects. First of all, with very few exceptions (see insert), Cuban journalists work solely for the external media and receive almost no feedback on their work from their compatriots who still live in the country. Secondly, how could they derive much benefit from a banned activity?

"Independent journalists on the island are not earning a living from their work," concluded the *Cubamet's* Vice President, Rosa Berre. Some journalists have had to sell their assets for a few foreign currency bills, like Jaime Leygonier, who had to give up his camera. Others, like Dioloxys Rodríguez Hurtado and his wife, Belkis, worked as street vendors: "I was selling bottles of bleach, and Belkis, candy. Other *Cubanacán* colleagues were selling fruit. But we had to watch out for police fines, which could reach 30 euros."

The most fortunate of them can count on help from their friends or exiled relatives, but it is not easy to send money to Cuba. However, the exter-

nal media are trying to make a contribution. "At *Cubamet*, we pay every journalist who works with us 5 dollars for a short news piece and 15 dollars for a column or an article," Rosa Berre pointed out. At *Nueva Prensa Cubana*, Nancy Pérez-Crespo did not specify the remuneration for the various types of pieces produced, but is providing her contributors with financial assistance in the amount of one monthly stipend of between 40 and 60 dollars, collected by a woman journalist from Havana and shared equally among everyone. "It is intended to be an aid, not a salary. To that sum may be added, from time to time, contributions from relatives or other organizations," the director of *Nueva Prensa Cubana* mentioned. *Carta de Cuba* (see insert), directed from Puerto Rico by Carlos Franquí - a former combatant in the 1959 Revolution - sends, according to the latter, about 1,500 dollars a month to his thirty-odd regular contributors. In this case, too, it is meant to be an aid, not a salary. Other media, like the website *Encuentro en la Red* in Madrid, who mobilizes a dozen journalists for opinion pieces, preferred not to discuss financial issues for precautionary reasons. In Miami, *Radio Mambi* also chose not to express an opinion on this subject.

The heavyweight among the media comprising the Cuban diaspora, *Radio Martí*, simply does not have the right to pay a dime to its contributors on the island. "The station is subsidized by the American federal government. We are therefore a fortiori required to comply with the boycott," explained Pedro Corzo, one of its permanent staff members. However the station is practically the only media that can be heard on the island, despite attempts by Havana authorities to block information coming from Florida. "In order to have any feedback on our work, to know if our information was disseminated, we used to listen to *Radio Martí*, Isabel Rey Rodríguez recalled. To circumvent jamming by the authorities, the station, which operates 24h/24h, uses a shortwave frequency to transmit its broadcasts to Cuba.

The other exiled radio stations (see insert) are virtually inaccessible, for lack of an adequate frequency. The websites are blocked by Internet censorship, and sometimes hacked, but the companies that produce them also issue printed versions that are clandestinely circulated on the island. *Cubamet* therefore sends out a certain number of copies of its four-page semimonthly bulletin and its bimonthly magazine. Rosa Berre

commented with satisfaction that every month "two or three subscription requests that can only be fulfilled online are sent from Cuba." Prior to being a website, *Carta de Cuba* was a 96-page

magazine with a 6,000-copy circulation. Three issues are published annually, and Carlos Franquí claims that "500 to 700 copies are clandestinely distributed on the island."

#### THE PRINT MEDIA, OR THE (ALMOST) IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

With the Cuban government having a monopoly on information, as well as the means of distribution and printing, it is virtually impossible to find, in Cuba, even a single newspaper circulating that is not an officially approved publication. Some of the freelance journalists interviewed within the scope of this report cannot even imagine that any independent newspaper could exist.

Three years after the latest wave of repression, the Cuban government still "tolerates" the two Catholic magazines *Palabra Nueva*, founded in 1993 and affiliated with the Archdiocese of Havana, and *Vitral*, an 80-page bimonthly publication created one year later within the Pinar del Río Diocese (in western Cuba). Directed by a five-member editorial board, bolstered by some fifteen contributors per issue, *Vitral* has a current circulation of 9,000 copies according to its director, Dagoberto Valdés. It is distributed by mail or in churches. Although it used to be viewed as more daring than *Palabra Nueva*, the magazine now seems to be taking a more prudent approach by limiting itself to religious and cultural matters. More importantly, each issue is subject to the approval of the diocesan authorities, which, admits its director, enables it to be perceived as an internal publication of the Catholic Church and thus to escape censorship. (See our previous report of June 25, 2003 entitled *Cuba: the exception of the church* available on [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)).

Is it true, then, that there is no such thing as a totally independent press in Cuba? In Camagüey, a small 8-page monthly with a 50-copy circulation called *El Camagueyano*, is clandestinely distributed. Two or three journalists contribute to the publication as time permits. But one of them, who is being closely watched by the authorities, stresses "how hard it is to get the copies printed, since the regime has banned the sale of printers to prevent any dissident newspaper from being printed."

Another review is struggling to see the light of day: *Consenso*, which was founded on December 21, 2004 by the Progressive Arch group Social Democrat opponent, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, who does not claim to be a media professional. Nine journalists scattered throughout the central and western provinces nonetheless are helping to create this bimonthly, which covers political, social and cultural topics, but so far exists only in an online version ([www.consenso.org](http://www.consenso.org)) inaccessible on the island. After being assaulted several times by government agents, Manuel Cuesta Morúa is currently fighting to obtain permission to print his publication, in vain.

### Slaves of correspondence

Very few journalists worldwide are unable to work for their own readership and produce information that is accessible only from outside the country. Cuba's independent press shall, however, function in that way as long as a regime is in power that resists diversity of opinion. Enslaved by their dependency on correspondence, Cuban journalists must endure accusations of being "foreign agents" pinned on them by a government that nonetheless is responsible for placing them in that situation. "It is a dramatic situation. Most Cubans aren't even aware of what is going on in their country, even though their dissident journalist neighbor would like to tell them about it," sighed Pedro Corzo, of *Radio Martí*. To which his island compatriot, Jaime Leygonier, replied with a hint of pessimism: "Cubans living outside of Cuba are not always aware, either, of the situation of those who have remained in the country. A gap

in living styles has widened between us and communicating is not always easy", an opinion shared by other freelance journalists.

Carlos Franquí, who has been in exile since 1968, and has exchanged revolution for dissidence, thinks that journalists should play for time and bank on the demise of the regime and on the old age of President Fidel Castro (who turns 80 on August 13, 2006). "Independent journalism will survive no matter what, and the news will keep on getting through. We believed that the "black spring" would finally bring an end to all that, and we were wrong for two reasons. First, it is not in Fidel Castro's interest - especially now - to inspire an overly violent opposition. To the contrary, it is in his interest to "maintain" a peaceful opposition. Second, most government officials working for the repressive machine are growing weary of this regime." It may have accompanied Ricardo González into prison, but optimism has also spread beyond the island.

# Cuba : March 18, 2003 to March 18, 2006

Three years after "black spring," the independent press refuses to remain in the dark

## Conclusion

Three years of repression have thus not succeeded in annihilating Cuba's dissident press. Despite the pressures imposed on them by the government, its perseverance is helping to promote the construction of a civil society and a democratic future in Cuba. That is why Reporters Without Borders will continue to support Cuban independent journalists and small agencies, and relay their news. The organization also points out that 300 Cubans - including 24 journalists - are currently serving sentences behind bars that sometimes stretch as far into the future as thirty years, for having dared to think differently from those in power. In confronting this reign of the arbitrary, we call on international decision-making bodies and the governments of democratic countries to mobilize in favor of their release and exert, for this purpose, whatever pressure they can on the Havana authorities. We are asking European embassies to provide a more vigorous moral and material support to dissidents in general and to journalists in particular, and to make available to the latter the means they need to carry on their profession.

Reporters Without Borders will also continue to organize sponsorships of prisoners by members of the foreign media, and urging those among the latter who have not yet done so to support this initiative. Last of all, we appeal to the goodwill of the authorities of countries in which Cuban dissidents have sought refuge. The testimony of these exiled Cubans must help to change the image of what a "tourist paradise" is striving to conceal: a dictatorship than no myth can justify.