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Courtesy Miriam Leiva

The Damas de Blanco, or Ladies in White, march each Sunday to call for the release of loved ones imprisoned by the Cuban government.

In her kitchen overlooking Havana's crumbling skyline, Julia Núñez Pacheco recalls the day five years ago when plainclothes state security agents, pistols on hips, stormed into her home. They accused Adolfo Fernández Saínz, her husband of three decades and an independent journalist with the small news agency Patria, of committing acts aimed at "subverting the internal order of the nation." Over the course of eight long hours, agents ransacked the apartment, confiscating items considered proof of Fernández Saínz's crimes: a typewriter, stacks

of the Communist Party daily *Granma* with Fidel Castro's remarks underlined, and outlawed books such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*. As Fernández Saínz was hauled away, Núñez Pacheco remembers one of the agents turning to her and saying, "You know, we've been told you are decent, quiet people. No fighting, no yelling. It's a shame you've chosen this path."

Today, the 60-year-old Núñez Pacheco lives alone in this same Central Havana apartment. A blown-up photograph of her husband and autobiographies of Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X rest on a bookshelf. Núñez Pacheco survives on family remittances from overseas, occasional donations from international human rights groups, and her government-issued ration card, which allots for basic provisions. Like most prisoners' relatives, she is blacklisted and unable to work in any official capacity, as the state is Cuba's sole employer. She sees her husband infrequently because of the prison's distance from her home and rules that allow family visits just once every two months. Fernández Saínz, who is serving a 15-year sentence, is being held in central Ciego de Ávila province, more than 400 miles (650 kilometers) from Havana.

During a three-day span in March 2003, as the world focused on the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Cuban government ordered the abrupt arrest of 75 dissidents—29 of them independent journalists.

All of the reporters and editors were convicted in one-day trials and handed sentences that could leave some in prison for the rest of their lives. They were accused of acting against the “integrity and sovereignty of the state” or of collaborating with foreign media for the purpose of “destabilizing the country.” Under Cuban law, that meant any journalist who published abroad, particularly in the United States, had no defense.

Five years later, 20 of these journalists remain behind bars, along with two others jailed since the crackdown. Like Fernández Saíenz, most are being held in prisons hundreds of miles from their



Raúl Castro addressing the National Assembly after being named president of Cuba on February 24, 2008.

homes under inhumane conditions that have taken a toll on their health, according to an investigation by the Committee to Protect Journalists. At home, their families, unable to work, scrape for basic necessities while being regularly watched and often harassed by state authorities, CPJ found.

Cuba has dismissed international criticism, particularly from the United States, as the work of political adversaries out to weaken its government. But the imprisonment of these journalists in reprisal for their independent reporting violates the most basic norms of international law, including Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees everyone the right to “seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either

orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.” Cuba signed the 1966 accord on February 28 of this year, although it said it would place unspecified interpretations and reservations on certain provisions.

These unjust imprisonments have also drawn protests from writers and intellectuals worldwide, including several who are philosophical allies of the Communist regime. “As someone who has always celebrated the achievements of the Cuban Revolution, and particularly its health care and educational systems, I am saddened and outraged each time that freedom of expression is suppressed in Cuba,” the Chilean novelist, playwright, essayist, and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman told CPJ. As much as Dorfman denounces U.S. policies toward Cuba—such as its longstanding embargo, or “blockade,” as it is called in some political corners—he says the Cuban government is unjustified in continuing to hold these journalists.

“Even while condemning the blockade against Cuba and the constant attempts to overthrow its government, I stand firmly on the side of all Cuban journalists, who have every right to inform and criticize without fear of persecution,” Dorfman said. “Liberty is indivisible.”

Over the past five years, Cuba has freed a small number of journalists and dissidents in exchange for international political concessions. Spain, which has sought to reestablish influence with Cuba, has taken the lead in negotiations that have led to the release of some prisoners. Spain deserves credit for helping win the release of these journalists and dissidents, but the Cuban government is obliged by international human rights standards to release all of those who are unjustly jailed. Despite the periodic releases, Cuba remains the world’s second-leading jailer of journalists, behind only China.



CP/Monica Campbell

A photo of Oscar Manuel Espinosa Chepe being taken to court in 2003 now hangs in the journalist's Havana apartment.

Fidel Castro, who stepped down as president in February after 49 years in power, allowed his nation to pay a significant international price for these unjust imprisonments—drawing rebukes from allies as well as foes, and intensifying his country's isolation in the world. His successor, brother Raúl Castro, could restore bridges to the international community by releasing all of these prisoners. By doing so, immediately and without condition, he could help usher in a new era for Cuba's international relations.

Known in Cuba as the “Black Spring,” the crackdown showed that Castro's government was determined to crush grassroots dissent and tolerate prolonged international protest. Journalists arrested in the crackdown were key members of a movement that began in the mid-1990s, when Raúl Rivero created the independent news agency Cuba Press and Rafael Solano founded the counterpart Havana Press. The aim was to test freedom of speech by filing to overseas outlets critical dispatches and analyses about life on the tightly controlled island. The birth of these news agencies coincided with the growth of the Internet, which enabled the spread of their coverage.

Composed of opposition activists with a political bent and others who took a more straightforward journalistic approach, the nascent independent press contributed to foreign outlets such as *CubaNet*, a U.S.-based online outlet, and Spanish-language publications and Internet sites in Europe, such as the Spanish magazine *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*. Journalists provided radio reports to U.S. government-funded Radio Martí, which can be heard in Cuba, and to other Florida-based stations. The media outlets paid small fees per story. The stories drew not-so-small notice. Even before March 2003, the journalists were subjected to harassment and sporadic short-term imprisonments.

“International attention on these journalists was reaching a fever pitch,” said Andy Gomez, senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. Cuban officials, he said, feared they might lose their grip over the population by letting people vent their frustrations. “The government decided enough was enough.”

The crackdown was swift. Detentions began on March 18, 2003, and continued for another two days. Police raided the homes of political dissidents and journalists and accused them of being “counterrevolutionaries” or “mercenaries” at the service of the United States. During the hours-long raids, state security agents confiscated tape recorders, cameras, typewriters, computers, and fax machines, as well as books, newspapers, notepads, and research materials. The journalists were handcuffed, hustled from their houses, and taken to the headquarters of the State Security Department (known by its Spanish acronym, DSE), home of Cuba's political police.

At the DSE, they were tossed into small cells with prisoners charged with violent crimes. Their families waited outside for days, trying to assess the situation. One-day trials against them were held behind closed doors on April 3 and 4. In many cases, the families later said, the journalists were

unable to meet with their lawyers prior to the hearings, and their defense was given only hours to prepare. On April 7, local courts across Cuba announced their verdicts: The 29 journalists had been handed sentences ranging from 14 to 27 years in prison.



Ileana Marrero Joa, 39, and her three children. Her eldest son, Osmany, lost his job because his father is jailed.

CPJ/Monica Campbell

Most have been transferred from prison to prison several times since then, often as punishment for protesting the conditions of their incarceration, CPJ research shows. Many are held far from their families. Given Cuba's deteriorating transportation system and high travel costs, such distances are extreme burdens. Families, who are allowed short visits every four to eight weeks, bring the journalists nutritious meals, hygiene supplies, medicine, and clean clothes—staples not always provided by the prisons.

Cuban Minister of Foreign Relations Felipe Pérez Roque and Dagoberto Rodríguez Barrera, head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, did not

respond to letters, e-mails, and faxes sent by CPJ seeking comment for this report. The office of President Raúl Castro did not respond to faxes seeking comment.

All of the journalists are suffering from medical problems that have emerged or worsened during their five-year incarcerations, according to CPJ interviews with family members and friends. It is a litany of individual misery and governmental inhumanity: José Luis García Paneque, 42, has suffered malnutrition, chronic pneumonia, and a kidney tumor. José Ubaldo Izquierdo Hernández, 42, suffers from emphysema, a hernia, and circulatory problems. Ricardo González Alfonso, 58, has hypertension, arthritis, severe allergies, and a number of digestive and circulatory diseases. Omar Ruiz Hernández, 60, who suffers from high blood pressure and circulatory problems, recently learned that one of his retinas has become detached. In these and other cases, CPJ research shows, the government has failed to provide adequate medical care.

Prison conditions are appalling, according to these interviews, which have been conducted by CPJ over several years and documented in detail in annual editions of its book on international press conditions, *Attacks on the Press*. Prison authorities not only harass the journalists but also encourage other inmates to bully and assault the political prisoners. The journalists are warehoused in massive barracks or cubbyholed in undersized cells that lack ventilation. Drinking water is contaminated with fecal matter, the food with worms. Protests against these unsanitary conditions often land the journalists in isolation cells.

Their families struggle as well. Ileana Marrero Joa, 39, lives in a rundown Havana suburb with her three children. Her husband, independent journalist Omar Rodríguez Saludes, was imprisoned in 2003. Rodríguez Saludes was considered one of Cuba's most dogged street journalists, riding a bicycle throughout the city to catch press conferences and call in stories to Nueva Prensa Cubana, a

small Miami-based agency. Today, Marrero Joa and her children visit the 42-year-old Rodríguez Saludes for two hours once every two months, time spent eating a home-cooked meal and updating Rodríguez on efforts to win release of the political prisoners.

Rodríguez Saludes' 19-year-old son, Osmany, is impressed by his father's strength. "He says he's staying strong for us, so that when he's let out he won't be a broken man," the younger Rodríguez told CPJ. But once separated from his father, the lanky teen returns to his own bleak reality. He, too, is blacklisted. Last November, after months of working off the books hauling bread on and off trucks, he asked his boss if he could become an official employee. After being given a series of evasive answers, the younger Rodríguez was told his "criminal past" was a problem. "Having a dad in prison is my crime," the son says, leafing through a book of his father's street photography. "I might as well be in there with him. It's four walls for all of us."

With the aftermath of the 2003 arrests consuming their lives, families of the imprisoned dissidents have created a tight bond. Two weeks after the crackdown, the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) group was formed, gathering on Sundays at Havana's Santa Rita de Casia Catholic Church. After Mass, they walk 10 blocks to a nearby park. In the spirit of Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who call attention to relatives who disappeared during that country's military dictatorship, the Cuban group dons white, with each woman carrying a pink gladiolus flower and wearing a button with her loved one's picture that says "prisoner of conscience." They demand the prisoners' release and, at least, an improvement in conditions.

Pro-Castro groups attempt to thwart the Ladies in White. Hecklers call the women counterrevolutionaries on the U.S. dole. Photographs taken by a local journalist show a man striking Laura Pollán Toledo, a group leader and wife of jailed journalist Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez, in the back of the head during a protest. "As long as we're out in public demanding change, freedom, and human rights, we can expect acts of aggression," says Pollán Toledo, who lost her job as a high school Spanish teacher after the crackdown.

On a recent afternoon at her home in Central Havana, while a friend put her long blond hair in curlers (she would visit her husband the next day), Pollán Toledo pointed to a corner in her living room where she said she recently found a hidden microphone. Pollán Toledo's home, a popular gathering place for dissidents and relatives of jailed dissidents, is under constant watch. Pollán Toledo realizes that international recognition can provide a layer of security, but she adds that "immunity from punishment by the Cuban government is not guaranteed."

Yet, for the most part, a small corps of independent journalists continues to operate in Cuba in much the same manner as it did in 2003. There are close to 100 independent reporters working in Cuba today, most of them in Havana, although some provincial reporters are also active. Independent journalists told CPJ they do most of their reporting in the evenings, when they can be more inconspicuous. Though owning a computer in Cuba is unlawful without government permission, some have antiquated laptops; others use even older typewriters. Many just use a pad and a pencil. They usually file their stories by public phones during prearranged conversations with foreign media outlets. Others file by fax, and in some rare cases, through e-mail. Although the vast majority of their work goes to foreign Web sites or publications, Havana-based reporters occasionally use the computer facilities of foreign embassies to print an assortment of news pieces.

"On top of being harassed and not being part of the official press corps in Cuba, independent journalists in Cuba go without some of the most basic reporting tools, from having a cell phone or



Imprisoned journalist Fabio Prieto Llorente at the Kilo 8 Prison in Camagüey on March 11, 2005.

even a regular phone to steady Internet access,” says Hugo Landa, director of *CubaNet*. “I think that’s why a lot of independent journalists publish opinion pieces and short, firsthand accounts of things they witness on the ground, more than any type of investigative piece. What they are able to publish reflects the realities they run up against. I always feel that they are doing an admirable job, considering the difficult circumstances under which they work.”

They cover what Cuba’s official press largely ignores. The Cuban constitution allows the Communist Party to control the news and filter it through its propaganda-minded Department of Revolutionary Orientation. Press rights are granted only “in accordance with the goals of the socialist society.”

The independent press coverage reflects basic ideas and information protected under international agreements, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. CPJ reviewed 40 articles written from January to March 2003 by journalists who were imprisoned during the crackdown, and several dozen articles written by independent journalists, including former political prisoners, between 2006 and 2007. All were published on foreign news Web sites and media

outlets in the United States and Spain.

Coverage largely focused on social issues, including food shortages, empty pharmacy shelves, housing problems, unemployment, and poorly equipped schools. Reporters also covered Cuba’s dissident community, from the opening of independent home libraries and trade union movements to the harassment of human rights activists. They wrote about police harassment and human rights violations, ranging from the arrest of street vendors to violence against political prisoners. Criticism of the government and its leaders—mainly Fidel Castro—was common but not inflammatory. For example, in a January 2003 story on lengthy lines at a train station, now-imprisoned reporter José Ubaldo Izquierdo Hernández wrote: “How long will we have to wait to wake up from this nightmare that has lasted now 44 years?”

Five years after the crackdown, despite international pressure, Cuba has freed only nine imprisoned journalists. Among the released: Jorge Olivera Castillo, a 46-year-old who served his country as a soldier in Angola and as an editor at the state-run television station Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión.

In December 2004, Olivera Castillo was freed from a Guantánamo prison on medical parole after suffering from colon problems. Yet his freedom is conditional. He and his family have U.S.-issued visas, but Cuba denies them permission to exit. In fact, he cannot leave Havana and is barred from attending any public gatherings. His phone is tapped, his mail searched, and, without warning, state security agents pay him visits. They ask about his work and his family, and offer subtle reminders that his freedom is tenuous.

Despite these risks, Olivera Castillo continues to write. Sitting at his kitchen table in his cramped apartment in Old Havana, he taps away at a donated Dell laptop. Along with short stories, he writes political analysis for *CubaNet*. “There was a time when I believed in the revolution, but I then realized that as hard as I worked, I never had savings. I soon realized that a better life for myself and my family was not possible,” said Olivera Castillo, who once tried to leave Cuba on a makeshift raft bound for Florida. He eventually began working with independent news agencies such as Havana Press.

Olivera Castillo’s professional experience is rare among the independent press. Many are teachers, physicians, office workers, and engineers turned writers. Others hail from the dissident movement, either activists in independent unions or members of opposition political parties.

Contributing to mainstream foreign news outlets such as *The Miami Herald* and Spain’s *El País* are former high-ranking government officials. One of them, economist Oscar Manuel Espinosa Chepe, was part of an elite group of advisors to Fidel Castro in the 1960s and helped craft Cuba’s economic cooperation with Eastern Europe. Influenced by glasnost and perestroika in the 1980s, Espinosa Chepe began touting more liberal economic policies, such as loosening limits on land or business ownership. Steadily demoted as Castro rejected such reforms, he was eventually assigned work as a clerk at a small bank near his home.

Espinosa Chepe’s wife, Miriam Leiva, remained a member of the Communist Party and held a high-level post in the Ministry of Foreign Relations. When Espinosa Chepe decided to quit his clerking job and write for foreign outlets, Leiva faced pressure at work to either denounce him as a counterrevolutionary or lose her job. “They thought they were giving me a choice between remaining a somebody or becoming a nobody,” said Leiva, 60. Refusing to cooperate, Leiva was fired and the couple began contributing full-time to foreign media from their tiny Havana apartment. Leiva wrote about social ills such as prostitution and the disparities between consumer goods available to tourists and those for citizens. Espinosa Chepe produced sharp economic analyses that were circulated underground, and he hosted a weekly Radio Martí show called “Charlando con Chepe” (Chatting with Chepe). He spoke about increasing food imports, rising inflation, and falling investment. “I didn’t get a cent from Radio Martí,” says Espinosa Chepe, 67. “My main concern was getting the word out. We’d always find a way to get by.”

That has been extraordinarily difficult at times. Espinosa Chepe was swept up in the 2003 crackdown and languished in prison for more than a year. During his imprisonment, Leiva helped organize relatives of imprisoned journalists to protest, and she published commentaries in U.S. and European newspapers. By the time Espinosa Chepe was freed on medical parole in November 2004, he had lost more than 20 pounds and was suffering from gastrointestinal bleeding, liver problems, and high blood pressure.

Today, Leiva and Espinosa Chepe continue to work from a tiny apartment stuffed with books, many banned by the government. When asked if they fear another crackdown, Leiva said, “I refuse to be quiet and lose my dignity.” Espinosa Chepe, relaxing in a rocking chair after a home-cooked meal, nods in agreement. “We go on normally with our abnormal lives,” he says.

Remarkably, several imprisoned reporters have continued working behind bars. In prison, Olivera Castillo managed to pass outsiders 37 of his poems, which were eventually published in Spain. Journalists such as Maseda Gutiérrez, González Alfonso, and Normando Hernández González have smuggled out entire memoirs, a few sheets of paper at a time. Others have reported on human rights violations in Cuban prisons. In a recent essay published on *CubaNet*, for instance, Fernández Saíenz

denounced the treatment of an imprisoned human rights activist.

Since 2003, Cuba has used imprisoned journalists and dissidents as political leverage, sporadically releasing a few in exchange for international concessions. “Cuba has effectively used political prisoners as an element of political negotiation, as bargaining chips,” says Elizardo Sánchez Santa Cruz, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, a domestic human rights group that operates despite being officially banned by the government.

Since taking office in April 2004, the left-leaning government of Spanish President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has acted as a mediator between the European Union and the Castro government. Relations between Brussels and Havana—already strained by the EU’s 1996 Common Position on Cuba, which demanded improvement in human rights and political liberties in the island—were further damaged after the 2003 crackdown and ensuing EU diplomatic sanctions.

Spain’s strategy of engagement with the Cuban government, which differs from U.S. policies aimed at isolating Cuba through economic sanctions and travel restrictions, has gained support from EU members such as Britain while meeting opposition from northern and eastern members led by the Czech Republic. Nonetheless, in January 2005, the European Parliament voted to lift the 2003 diplomatic sanctions after the Cuban government transferred more than a dozen ailing dissidents from jail cells to prison hospitals and granted medical paroles to a number of others, including the writers Rivero and Manuel Vázquez Portal.

This February—just months after Spain announced the resumption of some cooperation programs between the two countries—Cuba freed four more prisoners, including independent journalists José Gabriel Ramón Castillo and Alejandro González Raga. Prominent dissident Oswaldo Payá, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, says the dialogue between the two governments has been important, “but it can also be used as a smoke screen to hide the fact that there has been no real progress on human rights.”

These are not ordinary times in Cuba, however, as Payá and others point out. The ailing 81-year-old Fidel Castro, who handed over day-to-day power to brother Raúl in July 2006, announced on February 19 that he was officially resigning as president, ending nearly a half century of rule. The National Assembly named Raúl Castro, 76, as president five days later.

With Raúl Castro in charge, there have been hints at economic, agricultural, and administrative reforms. His government’s decision to sign the four-decade-old International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while a potentially encouraging move, was clouded by the vague caveats it immediately placed on the document. “Signing this agreement is a positive thing,” Payá says, “but in order for the decision to be coherent, the government must release the political prisoners who are jailed for peacefully practicing and promoting these rights.”



Blogger Yoani Sánchez, 32, in her Havana apartment.

Some change is coming from the ground up, as a new generation of tech-savvy bloggers emerges. On a recent afternoon, Yoani Sánchez, a slim 32-year-old wearing baggy surfer shorts and a T-shirt, sat at a small, wooden table in her living room and sipped a strong Cuban espresso. Here is where she writes entries for her blog *Generación Y*, created last April. The blog chronicles her everyday observations of Cuba, from the abundance of José Martí statues to bored youth and the workings of Cuba's black market. In a January 8 entry, Sánchez writes how she cannot “conceive a day without immersing myself in the black market in

order to buy eggs, cooking oil or tomato paste.”

She heads to one of Havana's Internet cafés once a week, a practice that is extremely expensive. (One hour at an Internet café in Havana typically costs 160 pesos [US\$6], about one-third an average monthly salary on the island.) But Sánchez works fast, quickly uploading her files from a flash memory drive and downloading readers' comments and e-mail. For cash, Sánchez approaches tourists and offers to give them walking tours of the city. “My friends think I'm taking a huge risk with my blog,” says Sánchez, who posts her real name and a photo of herself on her blog. “But I think it's my way of pushing back against the system, if only a little bit.”

Other newcomers include *Sin EVAsion*, a blog run by the pseudonymous Eva González, who describes herself as part of the “generation that came of age in 1980,” when Fidel Castro gave permission to any person who wanted to leave Cuba to do so from the port of Mariel, which he declared “open.” As a result, some 125,000 Cuban refugees left the island during what became known as the Mariel boat lift. It's a generation, she says, that struggles “between disillusion and hope.” Another new blog is *Retazos*, run by the colorfully pen-named El Guajiro Azul, who lives in Cuba “while he has no other option.” Blog entries range from essays on Cuban censorship to the manual work that elderly Cubans turn to in order to supplement their meager pensions.

Most reader comments thank the bloggers for publishing critical views. Others take the bloggers to task. The popularity of Sánchez's blog—she said thousands have visited—has generated a wave of pro-regime comments from readers who have added pro-government links and slogans such as “Viva Cuba! Viva Fidel!” It is, in its own limited way, a forum for opposing views.

Five years after the crackdown, the independent press movement is far from being deterred. On a recent weekday morning, independent reporter Olivera Castillo makes his way along one of Havana's main avenues to a pay phone, where he'll call a contact for a story he's reporting. On the sidewalks, elderly men play dominoes as a line of people snakes down the block awaiting a crowded bus. Olivera Castillo keeps walking. He has work to do, although he knows that what he writes today could be the tipping point for his arrest and return to prison. But he pays no mind. “I refuse,” he says, “to live in fear for expressing my ideas.”

Carlos Lauría is CPJ's senior program coordinator for the Americas. María Salazar is the program's research associate. Monica Campbell is a freelance journalist based in Mexico City.

CPJ's Recommendations

CPJ calls on the government of President Raúl Castro to implement the following recommendations:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all imprisoned journalists.
- Vacate the convictions of the nine journalists who were released on medical parole since the 2003 crackdown.
- Ensure the proper care of all journalists in government custody. We hold the government responsible for the health and welfare of those incarcerated.
- Fully meet its commitments under the recently signed International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by allowing journalists to work freely and without fear of reprisal.