

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN CUBA:
WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW AND WHY?

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If you harbor any doubts as to whether Human Rights and non-violence work are forms of political activism, just recall some of their best known advocates: Ghandi in India, Martin Luther King, in the U.S., Perez Esquivel in Argentina and, most recently, Rigoberta Menchu in Guatemala, just to name a few. We, Cuban Human Rights activists, are no different from these others, even when few people know about our work. So, paraphrasing a very interesting and recent American political figure, we begin our presentation by saying: who are we? And why are we here?

Cuban Human Rights organizations are divided into two cooperating, mutually complementary groups: the *internal (activist) organizations* and the *exile (support) groups*. We say complementary because, consciously or not, one group works for and supports the other.

The Internal Human Rights organizations are formed by *activists* inside Cuba who protest government abuses, argue their cases before the constituted authorities and report them to Human Rights organizations all over the world. Some well known internal activists are Elizardo Sanchez, who was beaten unconscious by government sponsored mobs last December 10, anniversary of the U.N. Human Rights Declaration, and then arrested by the Cuban government on charges of "public disorder". And the brothers Gustavo and Sebastian Arcos Bergnes, who head the *Comite Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos* -for which reason Sebastian was recently sentenced to several years in prison.

The Exiled Human Rights organizations disseminate, abroad, the reports that our colleagues inside Cuba gather and send us. We also search for support from sister international organizations. It is because such human rights violations become known outside Cuba that the internal organizations can operate inside the Island -for 12 years ago, when this writer lived in Cuba, the counted dissident and human rights activists were either *invisible* or *neutralized* inside the prisons. Internal and External Cuban Human Rights organizations are like the strings and the box of a guitar: the internal groups produce lovely music that the external ones amplify and provide resonance for, so it can be heard wherever it is needed.

But, why are we active, inside and abroad? What makes us put much time, effort, resources and, for those inside Cuba, even risk their lives and that of their families? It is because rejecting oppression is only a natural instinct. And because it is a form of political struggle. The violation of human rights is a hideous act -hideous like a roach. We can try to kill roaches, one by one, or we can try to clean up the roach nest and finish altogether with the filth. This is why, in its last analysis, Human Rights work is, necessarily always, associated with some form of political activism. And we, Cuban activists, are unapologetical about it.

Inside Cuba -or any other totalitarian state, be it Burma or South Africa- Human Rights groups start by demanding their right to exist. They request from the government the status of a legal association. When this right of peaceful assembly is denied as is the case in Cuba, such denial becomes a flagrant and overt violation. Then, human rights groups edit newsletters disseminating such "dangerous" political material as the U.N. Declaration of Rights of Man. For such activities, Cuban activists are constantly thrown into prison under the charges of "enemy propaganda". Cuban Human rights activists also report abuses (perhaps their best known function) specifically to the

U.N. Rapporteur for Cuba (which is no longer allowed in the country). For this, in 1989, Elizardo Sanchez and other activists were prosecuted and convicted.

Abroad, Cuban Human Rights activists constantly monitor the short wave stations and the international press for violation reports. And we share among our different organizations this information. Oscar Alvarez and Ariel Hidalgo, in Miami, are the official representatives of several internal human rights organizations. Through the telephone and other contacts they obtain current information that we all use. Frank Calzon, for Freedom House in Washington DC, has done likewise for years. And Americas Watch and Amnesty International officials, in New York City, have also shared information with us.

We then take these cases to the best jury: **public opinion**. We present our cases to the media, the professional associations, the unions and the authorities. We take these cases to the U.N Commission in Geneva and write reports, articles, give talks and seminars and, in every way and mean imaginable, we share this information with others in the international community.

Disseminating human rights information is very important because, in general, we deal with five different groups of people, three of which we really want to reach. The first two groups, the outright hostile (who still defend Cuba as the last bastion of Socialism) and the completely convinced that Human Rights are systematically violated in Cuba, are not of much concern to us.

The three groups of interest are, first, the *indifferent* (Cuba? Where? In Central America? That is too far!). Then, the *misinformed* (Wasn't Cuba just a big American brothel until Castro came to power?). These two groups can be shown facts they are not aware of and their minds and hearts can be touched. Lack of information is no sin; just a rectifiable condition.

The *prejudiced* are the worse and there are many of those. Recently, a well learned professional referred to Radio Marti, the Voice of America Program for Cuba as "the American station that broadcasts propaganda to Cuba". I courteously inquired if he spoke Spanish -which he didn't. This left me wondering how could this person *know* whether Radio Marti was a propaganda station or not -for it only broadcasts in Spanish! This is a classical example of prejudice and can be classified with such similar others as: "jews are stingy", "Hispanics carry knives" and "blacks are lazy". Is there any difference?

By denouncing human rights abuses in Cuba we are setting the record straight for misinformed and prejudiced people. But most important, the Cuban government *does care* about international opinion -for it may hurt its possibilities of receiving much needed economic aid and tourism. Therefore, providing information about human rights abuses gives us Cuban Human Rights activists the only lever we can use, first, to protect our brothers and sisters working inside the island. And then, to promote a peaceful, swift and certain evolution toward pluralism in Cuba, with social justice and respect for human rights.