

## **Cuba-Recent Releases**

In the last days, the Cuban government has released several political prisoners, who were part of the Cuban government's major crackdown of March 2003, which incarcerated seventy-five dissidents.

Among the released dissidents are poet and journalist Raul Rivero, political leader Osvaldo Alfonso Valdes, former president of Partido Liberal Democratico de Cuba (PLDC), economist Espinosa Chepe and dissidents Marcelo Lopez, Margarito Broche and Edel Jose Garcia. Raul Rivero was one of the most recognized Cuban dissidents in prison. Nearly all the others were suffering from health problems. Technically, prisoners are released on conditional liberty, "a probation license" that can be revoked, at anytime, by the government.

In general, the repression level has not diminished. The regime continues to harass the opposition. The released dissidents have received the veiled threat of being sent back to prison, if they persist in opposition activities. They are also encouraged to leave the country. In fact, the majority of them are set to go to exile soon.

These releases are part of a strategy of the Cuban regime, that aims at strengthening the position of the Spanish government concerning the revision of measures adopted by the European Union council of ministers, and to influence this European organ in that direction.

The 2003 EU sanctions included a reduction in the number of visits by European authorities and cultural exchanges, and also the invitation of dissidents by the different European embassies to celebrate their respective National Days—what curiously bothered the Cuban government the most.

This symbolic action provoked a strong reaction from the government of Havana. Ever since, the Cuban government has frozen diplomatic relations with the European embassies, because it does not want to legitimize the opposition —official policy affirms that there are no legitimate dissidents in Cuba, and none of their parties or organizations is recognized.

Nevertheless, the Dutch government, which actually presides over the European Union Council, together with other European governments—France, Germany, The Czech Republic, Poland and now after a diplomatic incident, certainly Slovakia —have showed their reluctance to change the measures. Considering that the vote has to be unanimous, the Spanish government will probably not obtain its needed consensus during coming negotiations in December and thus the status quo will not change. The only remote possibility is that the Spanish government succeeds negotiating with each of the reluctant governments the change of their positions, but that would require the spending of a lot of negotiating capital and that none of the other governments is adamant on its position. It is very unlikely to happen.

On the other side, none of the released dissidents are core activists of the Varela Project, which demonstrates, once more, that this popular initiative for peaceful change is considered a high-priority enemy by the Cuban government.

## **Summary**

The Cuban government has released several political prisoners in fragile health and famous dissident poet, Raul Rivero, all of them on conditional freedom, with the intention to exile them and reinforce the Spanish government position, in favor of softening the political tone of Europe in respect to the Cuban government. This strategy will probably fail, because the European Union Council of Ministers requires unanimity to change the measures adopted in 2003 regarding Cuba, and that consensus has not been reached.