



human rights *first*

The Right Honorable Jack Straw
Foreign Secretary
The Foreign Office
London,
United Kingdom

August 11, 2005

Dear Secretary Straw,

We are writing to you in the context of the British presidency of the European Union with the hope that you will take the opportunity to raise our concerns with your EU partners. Human Rights First, a nongovernmental human rights organization based in New York, is extremely concerned about what appears to be a renewed government crackdown on political dissidents and rights activists in Cuba. Between July 13 and 22, Cuban authorities arrested at least 57 dissidents, of whom 15 remain in detention. The activities that appear to have led to their imprisonment were their nonviolent activism for human rights and democracy, and their peaceful dissent from government policy. At this time of increased repression on the island, Human Rights First strongly urges the European Union to unequivocally denounce the arrest of peaceful human rights and democracy activists and independent journalists in Cuba, and insist that all remaining political prisoners be immediately released.

On July 22, 2005, Cuban authorities arrested 33 dissidents preparing to attend a demonstration in front of the French Embassy in Havana to demand greater European attention to the plight of political prisoners in Cuba. The clampdown came on the heels of another series of arrests on July 13, in which at least 24 dissidents were rounded up during ceremonies to mark the 11th anniversary of the sinking of a ferryboat carrying Cubans attempting to immigrate illegally to the United States.

Alarming, Cuban authorities have indicated that at least three of those arrested, René Gómez Manzano, Oscar Mario González, and Julio César López, will be prosecuted under Law 88, which carries penalties of up to 20 years in prison. As you are aware, Law 88 was passed in 1999, but was applied for the first time against many of the 75 dissidents arrested in March 2003. The legislation

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establishes stiff penalties for those found guilty of vaguely defined “counterrevolutionary” or “subversive” activities – activities that fall within internationally-recognized rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly and association.

All three men – René Gómez Manzano, Oscar Mario González and Julio César López – are longtime human rights and democracy activists, whose peaceful promotion of basic rights and dissent from government policy have drawn the ire of the Cuban authorities. The most well-known of the three, Gómez Manzano, is a lawyer and prominent leader in the Assembly to Promote Civil Society (APSC), which organized a rare public meeting in Havana on May 20, bringing together over 100 representatives of Cuba’s pro-democracy movement.

In addition to the dozens of arrests and subsequent detentions of nonviolent human rights and democracy activists, independent journalist and librarians, various dissident groups continue to be targets of official harassment. As recently as August 9, the APSC reported that government delegates of the National Assembly of People’s Power were visiting APSC members in their homes in order to threaten them and prevent them from attending a scheduled APSC meeting.

In light of what the European Commission itself has described as a “clear hardening in the attitude of the government of Cuba,” Human Rights First is concerned to learn of a canceled meeting between representatives of the European Commission and relatives of recently imprisoned dissidents. According to news reports, several prominent political dissidents and democracy activists – including Martha Beatriz Roque, leader of the APSC – were turned away when they arrived at the Mission to accompany family members attending the meeting and to submit written testimony about the living conditions of imprisoned dissidents. Although five relatives were let in, the Mission apparently decided to cancel the meeting after government supporters gathered to demonstrate outside the Mission to denounce the dissidents and protest the meeting.

Although Human Rights First is pleased that European representatives agreed to meet with relatives of imprisoned dissidents, we are troubled by the Mission’s refusal to allow entry to the peaceful and well-respected activists that accompanied them. Closing Europe’s doors to the leaders of Cuba’s pro-democracy and human rights movements sends a distressing signal to the peaceful opposition, and may serve to embolden the Cuban government during a period of increased turbulence and repression. Canceling the meeting with the dissident’s family members only confirms that peaceful activists and opponents in Cuba can be silenced.

Human Rights First is encouraged by the *European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders*, which clearly outline the objectives of the European Union with respect to human rights defenders in third countries and in multinational fora. Section 12 of the guidelines states that “the EU’s objective is to influence third countries to carry out their obligations to respect the rights of human rights defenders....The EU will make its objectives known as an integral part of its human rights policy and will stress the importance it attaches to the protection of human rights defenders.” This section goes on to specify that “where the Presidency, or the High Representative for the CFSP or EU Special Representatives and Envoys, or European Commission are making country visits, they will, where appropriate, include meetings with, and raising individual cases of, human rights defenders as an integral

part of their visits to third countries....” Human Rights First firmly believes that in the case of Cuba, such visits with human rights activists and peaceful dissidents are not only appropriate, but essential.

Human Rights First strongly urges the European Union to speak out forcefully on behalf of Cuban human rights activists wrongfully imprisoned and demand their immediate release. We believe that courageous activists in Cuba who incur considerable risks in order to express their support for basic rights and freedoms deserve the wholehearted public backing of the international community, especially from the governments of the European Union which have made explicit commitments to support human rights defenders world wide. We will continue to monitor developments in the policies of the European Union toward Cuba. Thank you for attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,



Neil Hicks
Director of International Programs