

Testimony of Mr. Normando Hernández González

Independent Journalist

Thursday, February 16, 2012

“House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights”

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Payne, and members of the subcommittee:

My name is Normando Hernández González, and I am a former prisoner of conscience from the cause of the 75, or what is also known as the Cuban Black Spring. In 2003, over the span of just 10 days, the Cuban government requested that I receive a life sentence, which in Cuba is considered the last alternative to being executed by a firing squad. On the eleventh day, in summary form, they gave me a trial, which concluded with a sentence of life in prison, and on the twelfth day, they sentenced me to 25 years of detainment, of which I completed 7 years and 4 months. My "crime"? To defend, with the tip of my pen, freedom of speech, press, thought, conscience. I was exiled to Spain in 2010 together with my wife and daughter after an agreement was reached between the governments of Cuba and Spain, and the Cuban Catholic Church.

Currently I am a Reagan-Fascell Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, but I am speaking in my personal capacity and the views expressed here are entirely my own.

At the outset, let me point out that the violence of Cuba's military junta against my countrymen increases every day. The Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an independent organization in Cuba, confirmed 631 arbitrary arrests in the month of January 2012, an increase of 135% in comparison with the same period last year when there were 268 arrests. In the streets, human rights defenders, especially women, are kicked and beaten by the political police, and, as was the case of Yris Tamara Pérez Aguilera, knocked unconscious due to blows to the head. . The Ladies in White are also victims of repression. Many have reported that while detained, police strip them naked, shout obscenities at them, touch their genitals, and threaten to rape them.

We are mourning the death of dissident Juan Wilfredo Soto who, in May 2011, was kicked by a policeman to the point that he died two days later as a result of the beating. In October 2011, just 5 months after the death of Wilfredo Soto, they murdered the leader of the Ladies in White, Laura Pollan Toledo. It has been barely 28 days since the murder of prisoner of conscience Wilmar Villar Mendoza, following 50 days on a hunger strike. I say “murdered” because these deaths occurred under the custody of the state and were completely avoidable. Three dissidents killed in the last 8 months, only 90 miles from the most democratic country in the world.

Today, I condemn the Cuban military junta and call for justice for the martyrs and people of Cuba.

For my part, I was in four Cuban prisons. I entered prison as a completely healthy person, but now I live with the bacillus of pulmonary tuberculosis, irritable bowel syndrome, chondromalacia patellae in both knees and in the trachea. I also suffer from chronic depressive disorder with somatic symptoms, and I live without my gallbladder thanks to torture I suffered during my final two years in prison.

Today, however, I prefer not to talk more about myself, but rather, about those who are being tortured at this very moment. I want to speak not only of political prisoners, but also of the nearly 100,000 prisoners who live in poor, overcrowded conditions in the more than 250 prisons and labor camps that are in Cuba. I shall now describe some of the direct and indirect methods of torture to which Cuban prisoners are subjected.

In prisoner slang, the “guagüita,” or crucifixion, is a method of torture that consists of handcuffing the inmate, completely naked, with his back to the bars of the torture cell with arms open in the form of a cross. The prisoner is kept like this for hours, so that he is obliged to perform his bodily functions in such circumstances. In cold weather, the guards throw buckets of water in the early morning hours. Mosquitoes suck what little blood that can be heated.

The “sillita,” or little seat, is another of the torture methods used by the guards of the Cuban regime. This involves both hands being handcuffed behind the prisoner’s back and tied to another set of handcuffs fastened around the prisoners’ feet. Lying sideways on the damp or wet dirt floor, the prisoners are left to remain there for hours. Rats, cockroaches, ants and all of the insects that swarm in these dens of perdition find the tortured prisoner to be easy prey. I still hear their screams of terror in my mind. I do not know if I can ever forget them.

But these torture methods are nothing compared with what I believe is the worst thing that happens in Cuban jails. The sadism, negligence, and cruelty of prison guards and officials, in addition to the more direct and indirect torture, leads the prisoners to attack themselves so that they can demand the basic rights that all prisoners should be afforded under the Cuban penitentiary system. Out of desperation, they inject oil or urine mixed with feces into any part of the body, sever fingers from their hands, swallow barbed wire, melt plastic on their upper and lower extremities, make deep, long cuts with razorblades, cutting their own tendons and veins, or even insert cold steel needles into their eyes. Many lose their lives; others are injured for the rest of their days.

Honorable members of this committee, together with other former Cuban political prisoners, dissidents, and the peaceful opposition movement in Cuba, in effect, the true Cuban civil society, everything that I have put forward here, we have reported for many years to international defenders of human rights, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the European Parliament, the United Nations, and many others. At different times, these institutions have used our testimony to demand full respect for human rights in Cuba.

Mr. Chairman, for Cuba, the time is now. I strongly urge you to condemn this deplorable situation in which the fundamental rights of Cubans are being violated. Let us not allow the best sons and daughters of our country to continue to be tortured and killed. Without international support for peaceful Cuban opposition, the Castro brothers will continue repressing the people of Cuba and will massacre them, just like what is happening today to the people of Syria. Let us support the dissident movement and the peaceful Cuban opposition who courageously challenges the totalitarian system that has asphyxiated us for 53 years. Cubans know that we must solve our country's problem ourselves, but we need the help of the free world, and specifically help from you all, just as South Africa needed help during its time.

Honorable Members of the United States Congress, let us not forget that for Cuba, the time is now.

Thank you very much.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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1. Name: Normando Hernández González	2. Organization or organizations you are representing:
3. Date of Committee hearing: Thursday, February 16, 2012	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets.	
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