

## *From the Prisons of Cuba—A Cry for Help!*

*The following document, here published in English for the first time, comes from a group of 47 prisoners being held in the political prison, La Cabaña, in Cuba. The document is dated December 1969. It was submitted by the prisoners through the League for the Rights of Man and addressed to the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations. If and when this latter body considers this appeal, we shall be glad to report its action.—ED.*

TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE UNITED NATIONS:

**W**E TAKE this unique opportunity, the only one we have had in all these years, to bring before you and denounce before the world the cruelty and crimes to which we political prisoners of Cuba have been subjected.

On the Isle of Pines, a forsaken place of terror and barbarism, more than 7,000 of us lived, crowded in four compounds with a capacity of 870 men each. The guards made frequent rounds during which they mistreated us physically and verbally. What few possessions we had, they threw out. For the slightest reason we were taken to the punishment wards, small bare cells in which beatings and miserable conditions (water-covered floors, mosquitos, etc.) ruled; there we would stay for an indefinite time, sometimes eight or nine months. Our correspondence was limited to one letter per month and one telegram. On numerous occasions we saw them burn the bundles of letters our families would send us. Visits were once or twice a year, and only three relatives were allowed in for two hours; that is four hours of visits a year!

Food was scanty and of the poorest quality. Meat, eggs, fish were rare; we never saw milk. We were so weak that men would fall if they remained standing too long. We were all anemic and starving. Medical assistance was scarce and poor. The penal hospital saw only 40 to 50 men per month, and they never had the necessary medication. They prescribed only aspirin and simple medications made at the hospital. We were admitted only to serve as

guinea pigs for the recently graduated military doctors who were transferred out as soon as they had acquired some experience. The dentist was there only to perform extractions; rarely did he take care of cavities. Because of the poor nutrition, cavities were numerous. When they became painful, the solution was to extract. Today, there is not a single prisoner who has not lost part or all of his teeth.

### *Beatings and Bayonet Jabs*

WE REMAINED in this situation until 1964, when the most cruel, brutal, and inhuman plan of forced labor known in the history of the Americas began. Never has any group of men suffered so much. We left the compounds at five in the morning and usually returned at 6 or 6:30 P.M. Sometimes we returned as late as 10 or 11 at night. We ate our lunch in the field. It consisted of cooked corn-meal or bean broth, yams or bread. We carried our lunches to the fields and left them out under the hot sun until 12 or 12:30. Many times the food was spoiled by the time we ate it.

During the "Plan," the rounds were even worse. The "Corporals" came into the compounds with their machetes, hitting and wounding prisoners left and right. On one of such occasions, Mario Jimenez Figueredo lost an eye; on another, an old man, Erasmo Gomez, was almost blinded from a blow across his eyes; we were all beaten mercilessly.

In the field, the "Corporals" watched us

constantly and anything was considered reason enough for a beating—even leaving the line for a drink of water was cause for a beating. There were times when totally naked men were forced to pull up grass with their mouths. They would both hit and jab us, leaving wounds at times 20 to 25 cm. deep. The number of men who have been crippled in the different prisons of Cuba is countless.

### **Murders**

BUT THAT was not all. When they realized that they could not subdue us with these abuses, the shootings began. For any reason, they would begin to fire indiscriminately, increasing considerably the list of our martyrs. During the plan of forced labor, the following men, among other victims of such murders, died: Ernesto Diaz Madraga, Aug. 9, 1964; Luis Nieves Cruz, Sept. 21, 1964; José Guerra Pascual, Sept. 21, 1964; José Alfonso Solarana, Sept. 21, 1964; Jerónimo Candine, Jan. 8, 1966; Julio Tang Texier, Sept. 3, 1966; Eddy Alvarez Molina, Dec. 9, 1966; Diosdado Aquit Manrique, Dec. 16, 1966; Dany Crespo, Dec. 24, 1966; Francisco Nogales, Feb. 28, 1967. On Nov. 12, 1966, in the punishment wards, Roberto López Chávez died in acute pain as a result of a prolonged hunger strike.

Another mass murder committed in prison was that of 21 of our comrades, members of the so-called Escambray Cause. They had been on the Isle of Pines for three years. One morning they were called in to be transferred. Later, we learned they had been taken to Santa Clara to be "tried." There, all were sentenced to death. They were taken by truck near the Escambray to be shot. The shooting was by machine guns, as they came off the truck—a true massacre!

### **More Abuses and Vexations**

IN THE BEGINNING of 1967, the transfers to Cuba began. Again they put us to the test. This time they wanted to place us on the same level as the ordinary "rehabilitated" prisoners, trying to force us to wear their blue uniforms. Many men refused to put on the blue uniforms and were placed into the punishment dungeons and cells of provincial jails. For over a year and a half we remained there, dressed only in our underwear, half

naked, suffering from hunger and cold, incommunicado, lacking the bare essentials of human life. On our arrival from the Isle of Pines, we were put into La Cabaña, 250 men per cell block. Food was so scanty that three spoonfuls emptied the plate. There were some incidents in the dining hall. In one case, the men of a certain cell block found when they came to the dining hall that their meal was just some bean water. They refused to eat and were attacked by a group of soldiers armed with clubs and sticks. They wounded several of the men.

At muster time, they usually made us run so they could mock and demoralize us. At one afternoon muster we refused to do it, and more than 200 soldiers armed with bayonets and clubs entered the yard. Our group was attacked and many of our comrades wounded. Some were taken to the Hospital Nacional de Reclusos del Príncipe (National Hospital for the Inmates of the Castillo del Príncipe) due to the seriousness of their wounds.

On July 29, 1967, they offered us the blue uniforms, which we refused to accept. We were then transferred to cell blocks seven and eight without any belongings and dressed only in our underwear. They jammed 350 of us in each cell block. We were so crowded that we had to sleep in two-hour shifts, for all of us could not lie down at once. In the provincial jails the situation was the same or worse. Months passed, and when winter came they dispersed us among seven cell blocks, "So the cold will get to you and force you to dress." We had nothing, not even a piece of paper to put under our backs. Barefoot, extremely thin, almost nude, we were brought before our families. Before seeing us, they were told they had to advise us to wear the blue uniforms. Their love and long absence from us made them accept.

Thus bribing our relatives, they tried to make us give in. Those were hard moments: mothers on their knees begging their sons to dress, others dissolving into nervous collapse and we, with tears in our eyes, trying to make them understand our principles and the bribery to which they were being subjected. Another method they used was to place ordinary prisoners in the same cells with us. Many hunger strikes broke out in the different jails

in Cuba to force the authorities to separate us from the ordinary prisoners. During one strike, in September of 1967, Luis Alvarez Rios died.

At "La Cabaña" and other prisons, they used poisons to give us diarrhea, destroying us physically.

### **The Slots**

IN MARCH, 1968, a group of prisoners was taken from the jail of Boniato, Oriente, to the "Slots" of Tres Maceo and San Ramón, prison farms for ordinary prisoners. The "slots" are in the middle of a prairie and consist of cells two feet wide, six feet long, and seven feet high, mud-walled with one small window to let in air. Three prisoners would be put in each cell. There was no room to move. They had to take care of their necessities right where they were seated. The purpose of this punishment was to make them wear the blue uniforms. A hunger and thirst strike began. When prisoners fainted, they would be given a shot and put back in the cells. This continued for almost two months when they were finally taken out. Their condition was deplorable, and they were psychologically destroyed. One of the men in this group, Francisco Balbuena Calzadilla, died on August 14, 1968, when, during a spell of insanity, he jumped from the roof of "El Príncipe."

### **Mental Torture**

THE COMBINATION OF COLD, hunger, and filth, facilitated the spreading of diseases among us: tuberculosis, anemia, pneumonia, grippe, and fungi constantly afflicted us. But medical attention was nil; they took advantage of our condition, telling us that all we had to do to receive medical care was to wear the blue uniform. Because of all the diseases and the torture, many of the men were driven to insanity. The only treatment they received was sleeping pills or electric shocks. The latter were administered haphazardly: four, five, ten, twelve shocks would be given until the patient was completely stupefied.

Because of poor care and the cruel use of shock treatments, on February 14, 1968, Rafel Dominguez Socorro, totally insane, hanged himself. At present, a great many prisoners are psychically destroyed. At that stage of our imprisonment, Eddy Molina died for lack of

medical attention at La Cabaña, and Alfredo Carrión Obeso expired in a labor camp.

### **Human Experiments**

AT PRESENT, the situation remains unchanged. Food continues to be of the worst kind, without spices or dressings. Treatment by the prison wardens is deplorable. With the slightest excuse they impose an unacceptable, humiliating discipline that is contrary to our principles and rights. Our belongings are often damaged or destroyed. We are allowed only three books, and they must be edited by the government. Our scarce correspondence is rigorously censored and any suspicious word is enough to suspend it. Our families are orally abused during their visits. Members of the Mint-Int (Ministry of the Interior) go around our homes terrorizing and haunting our relatives. Medical assistance has not become any better, and in the infirmaries and hospitals they do not give us any kind of medicine, their entry to the prison being forbidden.

At the Hospital Nacional de Reclusos del Príncipe, operations for hemorrhoids, nose and throat problems, etc., are performed by recent surgery graduates with no experience. Prisoners who face surgery are forced to witness operations. In this hospital, which is also a jail for ordinary prisoners, room number seven is for the mental patients. They are placed together with the ordinary prisoners, and as a result there have been murders and fights where political prisoners have been injured. The care there is so deficient that none of the men who have entered the hospital have been cured.

### **Hunger Strikes**

THOSE MISERABLE CONDITIONS led to two great hunger strikes, one in October, 1968, for 19 days and another last August and September, for 35 days. The latter was as inhuman an event as the world has ever seen. The number of prisoners who fell ill or went insane prove the cruelty of our jailers. They denied medical assistance to prisoners suffering from heart attacks, stomach upsets, diarrhea, and even total paralysis unless they changed their attitude. It was horrible to see 800 men in a state of total malnutrition, thrown to the mercy of cruel, unpredictable jailers.

Since these strikes, we still have not received any type of medical care. Instead, we have been guinea pigs in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Health. Doctors and students have studied us to measure the reactions of the human body after such a prolonged fast and the results of a convalescence without nutrients or medication. They wish, they say, to write a book!

We should mention the case of Carmelo Cuadra, the third political prisoner to die during a hunger strike. For eight months he suffered the abuses and tortures of the red assassins, and in April, 1969 he died suffering severe hepatic pains. Another case we cannot forget is that of Wilfredo Martinez, 30. He was completely blinded as a result of wounds he received when taken prisoner and has remained in that condition for seven years in prison, suffering the cruelty of this harsh confinement.

#### **The Vampires**

THE MARTYRS THAT have died and still die facing the firing squads are the victims of a most ironic policy. They are forced to give blood which the government donates "humanitarianly" to Vietnam and Laos.

We cannot overlook the selflessness and heroism of the women political prisoners. They, just as we, have undergone the same abuses. They have been stripped, thrown in with the ordinary prisoners, beaten and wounded. They have been kept incommunicado for interminable periods. But these worthy Cuban women have been able to rise above these tortures and vexations and have upheld the tradition of courage and strength of the Cuban woman.

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PLEASE receive our highest esteem for you and for the distinguished members of the Commission.

Please take this letter to its destination, copy and give it to the press.

It is a faithful copy of the original.

SIGNED, stating the number of the cause [in the Cuban legal code] for which they were condemned and the number of years of sentence:

Jose Piloto Mora, 99-61, 30 years, Pinar del Rio. Jose E. Gomez Guerra, 1160-61, 15 years, Matanzas. Rolando Morejon Guirado, 50-62, 15 years, Oriente. Joaquin Lassus Martinez, 320-60, 10 years, Oriente. Maximo Cora Abraham, 1151-61, 10 years, Matanzas. Guillermo Rodriguez Alvarez, 187-61, 10 years, Pinar del Rio. Justo Regalado Borges, 122-62, 30 years, Pinar del Rio. Roberto A. Ramos Alfonso, 439-60, 12 years, Havana. Alberto Mojena Ortega, 600-60, 12 years, Havana. Juan Rodriguez Esquia, 248-63, 30 years, Santa Clara. Benito Hernandez Gonzalez, 354-64, 6 years, Havana. Tomas Gonzalez Camejo, 568-60, 20 years, Havana. Rovaldo Calero Sosa, 437-65, 9 years, Havana. Angel L. Arguelles Garrido, 97-63, 30 years, Havana. Arturo S. Canet Oulego, 320-60, 10 years, Oriente. Fernando Gomez Fonseca, 33-63, 12 years, Havana. Feliciano Mohamed Esperon, 543-63, 12 years, Havana. Domingo Sanchez Costa, 460-61, 20 years, Las Villas. Manuel Mosquera Rodriguez, 460-61, 20 years, Las Villas. Servando Infante Jimenez, 86-65, 12 years, Havana. Mateo Rodriguez Rodriguez, 740-63, 30 years, Havana. Antonio Dominguez Hernandez, 31-62, 20 years, Havana. Justo Guerra Remedio, 565-60, 30 years, Havana. Rigoberto Perez Roque, 356-63, 20 years, Havana. Carlos Betancourt Rodriguez, 600-60, 20 years, Havana. Armando Yong Martinez, 21-62, 20 years, Havana. Angel Mendoza Mendoza, 1151-61, 10 years, Matanzas. Ricardo Fernandez Vichot, 24-67, 5 years, Havana. Luis Hernandez Garcia, 192-61, 10 years, Pinar del Rio. Herminio Gutierrez Martinez, 122-62, 15 years, Pinar del Rio. Roberto Coscolluela Valvarcel, 556-61, 20 years, Havana. Orlando Almanza Sanchez, 10 years, Oriente. Jose O. Rodriguez Terrero, 81-63, 20 years, Oriente. Mario C. Simon Suarez, 477-61, 20 years, Havana. Laureano Pequeno Velo, 484-62, 20 years, Havana. Enrique Garcia Cuevas, 829-60, 30 years, Las Villas. Jose R. Varona Primelles, 127-61, 10 years, Oriente. Gregorio Ariosa Rubio, 462-64, 9 years, Havana. Aurelio Vazquez Neceda, 60-61, 15 years, Matanzas. Angel Calzado Mesa, 480-61, 20 years, Las Villas. Pedro Sierra Vega, 981-61, 15 years, Matanzas. Jose Carreno Perez, 10-64, 18 years, Havana. Rene Ramos Gonzalez, mayo 63, 20 years, Pinar del Rio. Hipolito L. Diaz Montero, 17-64, 9 years, Havana. Mario Pedraza Marti, 360-63, 20 years, Havana. Roberto Alonso Gonzalez, 617-60, 30 years, Havana. Dagoberto Acosta Chirino, 71-63, 12 years, Pinar del Rio. Roberto Iglesias Martin, 144-63, 8 years, Pinar del Rio.

*Political Prison, La Cabana, December 1969.*