

Cuba: The suspicious deaths of Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero



Oswaldo Payá, age 60, was killed Sunday, July 22, 2012 in a car crash. Founder and leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (known for its Spanish abbreviation MCL), he was regarded as Cuba's leading dissident leader. Also killed was **Harold Cepero**, a 32-year old activist from the movement. They had been traveling in a rental car in Cuba's eastern Granma province with two foreign visitors —Angel Carromero, member of the youth branch of Spain's Popular Party, and Aron Modig, President of the Christian Democrat Youth League of Sweden, both 27.

Hospital sources said that Payá had arrived dead, Cepero had died a few hours after his arrival, and the two foreigners had suffered only minor injuries. Over a week

later, Cuba's Interior Ministry reported that Paya had died instantly from head trauma while Cepero had died from an "acute respiratory insufficiency" brought on by a blood clot caused by a bone break in his left leg,



From the very first reports, just hours after the crash, Paya's wife and children in Havana indicated and have consistently maintained that they did not believe there had been an "accident" because the two foreigners had sent word they were being pursued and, subsequently, both has sent text messages that their car had been rammed by another vehicle and forced off the road, crashing. (Find first audio statements (Spanish) by Paya's wife, Ofelia. at <http://www.martinoticias.com/content/paya-esposa-ofelia-acevedo/13044.html> and his daughter at <http://www.goear.com/listen/f42b3b2/rosa-maria-paya-accidente-de-su-padre-oswaldo-paya-mcl>.) They have also consistently reported —as confirmed by many foreign visitors— that Payá was under constant under surveillance by State Security (Cuba's political police), harassed, and that he and subject to numerous acts of intimidation, including at home. Payá was followed constantly and routinely threatened with death by Cuba's political police, all of which had intensified as of late. On June 2nd, Payá and his wife were traveling in their 1964 VW van on the outskirts of Havana when it was hit forcefully from behind by another vehicle. The car flipped and was badly damaged, however they escaped without serious injury and decided to downplay the apparently deliberate act. The MCL's longstanding policy has been to not serve as echo of the terror the regime intends to spread.

Just hours after the crash, when Cuba's Foreign Ministry confirmed Paya's death, it said authorities were investigating the crash but stated there were eyewitnesses who reported the car had lost control and crashed into a tree. Five days after the crash, on July 27th, Cuba's Ministry of the Interior issued a communiqué stating that there had been three passersby as witnesses to the accident and that an investigation conducted by four experts, all Cuban government officials, had "categorically" concluded the accident had been caused by the driver's lack of attention (not heeding signs to slow down due to road work), excess speed, and abruptly applying the breaks upon reaching a slippery surface (a stretch of unpaved road in repair). The car's speed, it claimed, could have been no less than 120 kilometers per hour.

Payá's family and a spokesperson for the MCL stated that the organization and the family did not accept the official version and demanded a serious, impartial, and transparent investigation they could trust. He explained: "In Cuba, we know, mechanisms of pressure and blackmail are employed by the state, the military junta, and the security forces that do their dirty work." To date, authorities have not provided the family any information other than a momentary verbal explanation by an officer delivering Payá's body that excessive speed had caused the accident and that there had been two witnesses. His belongings, which included a video camera, have yet to be returned.

As Carrmero and Modig remained in detention, hoping for a diplomatic solution, their governments made successive brief statements expressing confidence they would soon return home. But, almost a week after the crash, they guarded indicated they had not been allowed to see them for days and the Swedish government questioned why their citizen was being held. The following day, Cuban TV (government-controlled) showed videos of them both making separate statements denying that another car had caused the accident, Carrmero not expressing disagreeing with the Cuban government's version of the accident, and Modig stating he did not remember any text messages and apologizing for bringing funds to the dissidents and conducting activities the Cuban regime deems subversive. The following day, Carrmero was charged with involuntary homicide and Modig was allowed to return home to Sweden. The penalty for a death in a traffic accident is from one to ten years and two persons died.



Cuba's laws entail steep sentences for crimes against national security, which are multiple and defined very vaguely. (U.S. citizen Alan Gross is serving 15 years of prison for subversion for bringing equipment to Cuba for the Jewish community to connect to the internet.) Although Cuba had made it clear that they were in violation of several of these dispositions, they were not so charged. In addition, they escaped charges of violating the terms of their tourist visa, which entailed several years of prison.

The visit the four men made to the Granma province coincided with a cholera outbreak there. A signal that containing reports of the seriousness of this epidemic is of such priority to the government, the day after the crash, on July 23rd, President Raúl Castro, in a speech at the National Assembly, had complained of growing propaganda campaigns and distortions to discredit the country's health system and its worldwide reputation.

Analysts and former Cuban regime insiders believe that Cuba will continue obtaining compliance from Carrmero and silence from Modig in exchange for mercy in Carrmero's sentencing.

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