

DEATH OF WILMAN VILLAR MENDOZA, CUBAN POLITICAL PRISONER ON HUNGER STRIKE

January 27, 2012

Case Summary based on testimony of the widow and persons intimately linked to events leading to his death

31-year old Cuban political prisoner Wilman Villar Mendoza died January 19, 2012 after a 52-day hunger strike to denounce his unjust incarceration. He leaves a wife and two daughters ages 5 and 7.

The imprisonment, hunger strike, and death

Villar was from Contramaestre, a town northwest of Santiago de Cuba. Long disaffected with the Cuban regime, in August 2011 he had joined the human rights group Cuban Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica de Cuba, UNPACU), formed last year in the eastern part of Cuba.

On November 14, 2011 Villar participated in a public protest in Contramaestre. He and eight fellow demonstrators were briefly detained. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1bqvDEaz4Y>). Wilman Villar is the one holding the flag.) He had already been warned by State Security to abandon his dissident activities or face criminal charges and even disappearance. He was then summoned for a November 24th trial on charges related to a July 2011 domestic incident involving police (more on this below). Human rights defenders were prevented from attending the trial and the tribunal was cordoned off by a large security contingent. The proceedings lasted just around one hour and the judge refused to allow witness testimony in his defense. His wife was authorized to enter the trial only at the end and the judge instantly dismissed her statement denying the false charge that her husband had hit her. A defense lawyer was assigned by the court; unsurprisingly, his minimal and weak efforts were irrelevant, as Villar told him publicly at the trial. A sentence was delivered right away of four years of prison for contempt, resisting arrest, and attempting against authorities. While any person convicted is by Cuban law entitled to a copy of the sentence, he did not receive it and his wife has been unable to obtain one.

Villar was sent directly from the tribunal to the feared Aguadores prison of Santiago de Cuba, where around 1,200 prisoners are subject to subhuman conditions and constant abuse by prison guards. He had vowed to object to arbitrary imprisonment to death and immediately declared a hunger strike denouncing the falsity of the judicial procedure and demanding his

release. He also refused to wear the uniform assigned to common prisoners. (During the Castro regime political prisoners have consistently protested its refusal to acknowledge their singular status, as was a long tradition in the pre-Castro era.) He put in solitary confinement in a tiny punishment cell naked and in extremely precarious conditions—in total darkness (all light blocked out), with only a hole in the ground as toilet and no water, crawling with mosquitoes, cockroaches and other bugs, and chained to the sole furnishing, a metal bed frame with no mattress.

Thirty days into his hunger strike, on December 23rd, prison authorities offered human rights defenders holding vigil in front of the prison a visit for the wife three days later if they agreed to help find a solution by which Villar would depose the hunger strike. They insisted on the visit that same day; his wife and the head of the Contramaestre UNPACU chapter, Jorge Cervantes, went inside. Villar was brought out of the punishment cell for the meeting. Having lost a lot of weight and looking emaciated and very pale, he reported having been denied water. State Security officers proceeded to tell him—his wife and friend present—that his sentence had not been formalized, that his case would be reconsidered, and that he could soon be released. Agreeing to discontinue the hunger strike, he was sent to the prison clinic and given intravenous hydration. His wife then went to the tribunal to file the paperwork for his release, where she was told she had been misled. On December 29th she went back to the prison to tell her husband. He resumed the hunger strike, insisting he was innocent. It was the last time she spoke with him.

Villar was sent back to the punishment cell. Malnourished, very weak, and with no clothes or blankets in the damp, cold, cell, he developed pneumonia. The prison's health personnel refused the family information on his condition, but it was evident that medical care had been denied and that Villar had been kept in the punishment regime. It was only after he was extremely deteriorated, on January 13th, that he was transferred to Santiago de Cuba, to the Saturnino Lora Hospital. Doctors found his condition to be so critical

that he was referred to the Juan Bruno Zayas Hospital, provincial facility for Santiago. When he arrived, he was placed in intensive care, hooked to a respirator, and fed artificially. Doctors, however, told the family that only a miracle could save him. His wife was only able to see him very briefly through a window at 2PM each afternoon. He died a week later of "multiple organ failure due to general sepsis." (Sepsis is a syndrome reflecting systemic inflammatory response, generalized infection, and organ dysfunction.) His hunger strike had lasted 52 days: November 24, 2011-January 19, 2012, stopping 5 days from December 23-29, 2011. If only counting days before he was artificially fed while unconscious, the hunger strike technically lasted 46 days.

Villar's wife, Maritza Pelegrino, was not allowed to see his body. She declared that Cuban authorities had had killed him and made orphans of their two girls. It is a tactic of State Security, she explained, to deliberately withhold medical treatment until the person is dying and it is too late. She reported that well into the hunger strike authorities had offered his release if she abandoned the Ladies in White group. When she declined, they threatened to take her daughters. She later learned that it had already been too late to save him.

Weeks before his death, the government had unleashed massive repression to contain any sign of protest or support for Villar. Members of Cuba's opposition

movement had been detained en masse or blocked from leaving their homes to prevent gatherings or visits first at the prison, then at the Santiago hospital. Large security forces had surrounded the medical facility and human rights defenders who went

"We are upholding the dignity of the Cuban people. Wilman Villar has shown that we know how to die for a just cause."

*— Jorge Cervantes, UNPACU
— Contramaestre,*

there were assaulted on several occasions. Several participants of an attempted vigil on January 18th were arrested and manhandled. When Villar's death was announced, violence was used against some family members and supporters who gathered at the hospital. Large security operatives were immediately put in place, especially in Contramaestre and nearby locations of eastern Cuba, to prevent funeral attendance. For days leading up to the death and until after the funeral, the house of Jorge Cervantes, head of the Contramaestre UNPACU, was under siege; with ten people including small children inside, they faced attacks with rocks, feces, and all sorts of objects. In all, dozens of people were detained, many beaten; some were arrested

attempting to enter hotels to send photos and reports by internet. Only a handful of opposition members were able to reach the funeral home, but were then prevented by authorities from attending the burial.

Amnesty International confirmed that it was on the eve of designating Villar a prisoner of conscience and issuing a worldwide call to action demanding his immediate release. It has strict criteria for this designation that includes a history of non-violence. An Amnesty spokesman declared: "The responsibility for Wilman Villar Mendoza's death in custody lies squarely with the Cuban authorities, who summarily judged and jailed him for exercising his right to freedom of expression." Many governments denounced the death and called for Cuba to respect human rights. The Cuban government, which denies holding political prisoners and instead characterizes them as mercenaries, released a statement that Villar "was not a dissident nor was he on a hunger strike." Cuban newspapers—all government controlled—ran front page editorials labeling him a common criminal, indignantly decrying an international campaign of lies against Cuba, and attacking its critics' records on human rights.

Until Villar's death, Cuba Archive had documented 12 cases of death by hunger strike of Cuban political prisoners; Orlando Zapata Tamayo's was the latest in February 2010. (See www.CubaArchive.org – section "Research Reports.") Prisoners held for non-political causes have also died in hunger strikes, the most recent on January 1st (René Cobas). Given this backdrop, as soon as Villar's health was in question, local human rights' defenders had called on Cuban authorities to give him medical care, warning they would be held accountable if he died. Many pleas were issued for international solidarity up to his death. His wife had gone to the prison repeatedly to demand medical treatment for him and had been ignored. On December 22nd, when she went with her two young daughters and several Ladies in White, they had been violently ejected and several ladies were beaten.

The Red Cross, the U.N. Rapporteur on Torture, and international human rights' monitoring groups are not allowed to inspect Cuba's prisons or detention facilities. In 2010-11, the Cuban government vowed to international pressure and released several dozen political prisoners, but around 60 are believed to remain. Short-term detentions for political reasons—mostly of human rights defenders—increased by 50% last year. Cuba's Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation documented 6,134 short-term detentions in 2011.

Biographical notes on Wilman Villar, his background, and opposition to the Cuban regime

Wilman Villar was born March 30, 1980. His mother abandoned him when he was a baby, leaving him with his paternal grandmother, who raised him. He grew up very poor. His father, of the same name, died in prison (Las Mangas of Bayamo) in 2006 after contracting an illness and not receiving adequate medical attention. He had been serving a sentence of around 7 years for sacrificing and stealing cattle without government permission (“hurto y sacrificio de ganado mayor”). This “crime” has countless thousands of Cubans in prison for long years merely for killing a cow for food, as strict laws ban possession and commercialization of beef. Wilman was reportedly traumatized by his father’s ordeal and death, which adding to his deep resentment of the regime.

Wilman’s biological mother lives in Havana and is married to a member of Cuba’s MININT (Ministry of the Interior). She and Wilman had established contact after he reached adulthood, keeping only occasionally in touch. His sister, and only sibling, is married to a member of State Security (the political police). These distant family members were brought by the government from Havana to the hospital in Santiago and were the ones, not his wife, treated as next of kin and given the medical reports.

Wilman was unable to live together with his wife and two small daughters, as they could not have their own home (Cuba has severe housing scarcity). His wife and children had to live with her parents in small quarters while Wilman lived in a very small room at his grandmother’s house about a block away, but visited frequently. He adored his family and picked up his daughters from school daily to walk them home. He had technical training as a textile machinery operator, but work opportunities are very scarce and he had been out of work for a long time. Most of his efforts were dedicated to looking for ways to feed his family and seeking employment. In 2010, they had moved to Havana for almost a year seeking better opportunities. Finding no luck and facing dire economic straits, his wife and children had returned to Contramaestre while Wilman continued his job search. But, he was soon deported back home (in 2011), as it is illegal to move to Havana without government permission. Wilman was very downhearted over their situation, his daily struggle to support his family, and his fruitless efforts to find means of sufficient sustenance.

Wilman’s rejection of pervasive injustices in Cuba and his hostility towards the government was well known in

his hometown long before he officially joined the organized opposition movement. While living in Havana, he had come in contact with members of human rights’ groups. Back in Contramaestre, he heard about the new group Cuban Patriotic Union (Unión Patriótica de Cuba, UNPACU) and in August 2011 started to participate in the activities of the local chapter. Led by former political prisoner of the 2003 Black Spring José Daniel Ferrer García, who was freed from prison in early 2011, the UNPACU coalesced last spring and formally constituted in August 2011 to operate in the eastern part of the island. It advocates human rights and a peaceful transition to democracy and requires from its members an ethical lifestyle and a firm commitment to never respond with violence to the government’s aggressions.

Wilman began to spend time at UNPACU’s learning center located in a humble Contramaestre home. Their educational activities focus on how to be a better citizen and family member and on learning in order to improve general knowledge. On September 2, 2011 he became an official member of UNPACU, taking the oath of non-violence. His enthusiasm was palpable; he had insisted on bearing the Cuban flag for the November 14th demonstration when their small group walked a centric street calling for “Freedom” and displayed pro human rights’ signs. He had held onto the flag as police beat him until it shredded to pieces.

Wilman struggled to sustain his family with dignity and help his grandmother, but was very concerned to avoid triggering any potential charges of breaking the law, expectedly in light of his father’s experience. In Cuba, almost any economic activity aside from state employment, including selling practically anything, is illegal and grounds for long prison sentences. “Social dangerousness” is punished with jail even if a crime is not committed. Because families cannot make do with the state-assigned food rations, seeking daily food supplies is like navigating landmines. Wilman avoided overt illegal activities and insisted that he would not accept an unjust incarceration and would demand his freedom at the cost of his life.

Maritza, Wilman’s wife, joined the Ladies in White movement after her husband was imprisoned. The Ladies in White began as a group of women whose loved ones had been jailed as a group of 75 political prisoners in the spring of 2003. They advocated their release by marching peacefully wearing white clothing and bearing gladiolas. Over time, their loved ones were all freed, mostly in 2010, but the movement has grown to include women who advocate for political prisoners and human rights in general. They have endured extensive repression from authorities and in recent

times a heightening of beatings, detentions, and harassment. Regardless, their numbers continue to grow throughout the island.

A conviction on a fabricated domestic violence charge – favored State Security methodology

The incident for which Wilman was technically convicted to four years of prison occurred in July 2011. Wilman had been drinking and was having a loud argument with his wife. His mother-in-law became worried and had police called. Reportedly, she was not fond of him due to his poor background and inability to support his family. Wilman and his wife were not aware of the call and when police arrived, they explained that everything was all right and they could leave. But, Wilman was well known as a “counter-revolutionary” and the policemen insisted on detaining him. He protested the injustice and refused to enter the police car. He was then maced, severely beaten, and forced into the police car. Taken to the Baire prison, near Contramaestre, he was held incommunicado for four days. Authorities did not allow the family to see him, presumably because he had nasty bruises on the face and all over his body from the severe beating. After his release, there were no charges against him by any family members, police, or state authorities, even though the Cuban state typically charges a person who commits domestic violence even when the victim does not press charges; in fact, persons who deny having suffered evident harm are fined. This was the incident resurrected after Wilman participated in the November 14 demonstration, just as State Security had threatened on several occasions.

Several neighbors witnessed what had actually happened and at least one who was willing to testify in court continues to offer public testimony. Others who had confirmed Wilman’s innocence are now afraid. His wife has challenged Cuban authorities to allow her to speak on Cuban TV and show her face free of any facial disfiguration attributed to her husband’s beating. (See <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded &v=yG8Qdnns7PcH](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=yG8Qdnns7PcH)>.) Her mother, who had called the police, offered to testify in court on Wilman’s behalf and had confirmed Wilman’s account. Her home is currently under siege by authorities and she is now afraid to take a public stance.

Note: To date (1/27/2012), no foreign correspondents working in Cuba have contacted Villar’s wife nor the National Coordinator and the Contramaestre Director of the Unión Patriótica de Cuba.

See www.CubaArchive.org (section “Research Reports”) for photos.

Sources: Telephone interviews of January 26, 2012 with Maritza Pelegrino, widow, Jorge Cervantes, head of the Unión Patriótica de Cuba (UNPACU) in Contramaestre, and José Daniel Ferrer García, its National Coordinator, and telephone interview of Jan. 27, 2012 with J.D. Ferrer García. Numerous media stories and reports from Cuba and by international organizations were also consulted. (See Case #1130, Wilman Villar Mendoza, at <www.CubaArchive.org/database>.)

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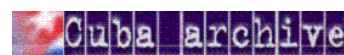
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We encourage direct assistance to Wilman Villar’s wife and/or the Unión Patriótica Cubana and can provide information on how to send it or serve as its conduit.



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