

Political prisoner's death highlights barbaric conditions and an alarming death toll in Cuba's prisons

February 23, 2010, Summit, New Jersey. Orlando Zapata Tamayo died today in a Havana at age 42 after a hunger strike of over 80 days. He had chosen this extreme method of protest to demand respect for his personal safety after enduring numerous beatings and tortures at the hands of Cuban prison authorities. He sought to be recognized as a prisoner of conscience, requesting similar conditions as those under which Fidel Castro had been held for a year and a half during the Batista regime.

Zapata was a member of several opposition groups calling for democracy in Cuba by peaceful means. He had been incarcerated for four months from December 2002 to March 2003, accused by Cuba's political police of "disrespect." Just thirteen days later, he was again apprehended while participating in a fast with other former political prisoners in what became known as the Black Spring clampdown against 75 dissidents around the country. In May of 2004 he was sentenced to 3 years of prison for contempt, public disorder, and disobedience. Amnesty International recognized him as a prisoner of conscience. Later, he was tried on additional charges and his sentence extended to 36 years. In early December, Zapata went on hunger strike to demand proper treatment. Prison authorities refused him water for 18 days, leading to kidney failure. He was then held naked over a powerful air conditioner and developed pneumonia. Earlier today and already in critical condition, he was admitted to Hermanos Ameijeiras hospital in Havana and began receiving fluids intravenously. He died hours later. The Cuban government never responded to his demands.

Cuba Archive has documented ten other cases of death by hunger strike in protest of prison conditions under the Castro regime: *Roberto López Chávez*, 12/11/1966, *Luis Álvarez Ríos*, 8/9/1967, *Carmelo Cuadra Hernández*, 7/21/1969, *Pedro Luis Boitel*, 5/25/1972, *Olegario Charlot Spileta*, 1/15/1973, *Enrique García Cuevas*, 5/23/1973, *Reinaldo Cordero Izquierdo*, 5/21/1975, *José Barrios Pérez*, 9/22/1977, *Santiago de Jesús Roche Valle*, 9/8/1985, and *Nicolás González Regueiro*, 9/16/1992. From 2005 to today, 97 documented deaths of prisoners in Cuba have resulted from extrajudicial killings by guards, suicide or alleged suicides, and lack of medical care. This information is generally obtained from political prisoners held in the same facilities, so only a fraction of prisons are reported on and many more deaths are feared. Users may register at no cost at www.CubaArchive.org/database to access Cuba Archive's electronic database of documented cases of death and disappearances resulting from the Cuban Revolution. For all documented deaths from hunger strike, enter the names above into the database or conduct an Advanced Search by selecting "hunger strike" in Cause of Death criteria

Barbaric prison conditions lead to systematic malnourishment, severely deteriorated health, disease, acts of self-aggression and extreme suffering of prisoners and their loved ones. Over 200 political prisoners are held with tens of thousands incarcerated for "economic crimes" after resorting to the black market for basic sustenance that failed central planning cannot provide. The Red Cross and other international human rights' monitoring groups are not allowed to inspect Cuba's prisons.

Cuba Archive calls on all governments, institutions, and people of goodwill to hold the Cuban regime accountable for its crimes and to help the Cuban people attain their intrinsic right to live safely and in freedom. At minimum, inspection of Cuban prisons should be undertaken by the Red Cross, United Nations representatives and reputable members of the international human rights' community without prior notice so the Cuban regime may not fake actual conditions.♣