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Most deaths largely ignored

BY MARIA C. WERLAU
www.CubaArchive.org

The recent death by hunger strike of Orlando Zapata Tamayo is not a first-time event in Cuba. Sadly, we have records of another 12 political prisoners who died in hunger strikes during the Castro regime. More such deaths are probably unrecorded.

The Cuban regime has launched an orchestrated campaign to portray Zapata as a dangerous criminal behaving bizarrely. Character assassination is a favored tactic to manipulate public opinion. But Amnesty International does not designate "prisoners of conscience" lightly. In this case the facts are clear: The 42-year-old brick mason's "crimes" involved his peaceful opposition to a ruthless dictatorship.

No free country jails anyone for "disrespect to the figure of the Comandante" for signing petitions for change.

Zapata turned to this extreme form of self-empowerment and protest when all other options had failed after years of unjust confinement, beatings, tortures and abuses. He demanded his safety and recognition as a prisoner of conscience, asking for no better treatment than the Batista dictatorship gave Fidel and Raúl Castro for leading the Moncada Army barracks attack. They enjoyed special privileges for political prisoners -- comfortable living conditions, media interviews, visitors, plentiful reading materials, correspondence and participation in group sports. Moreover, Batista caved to public demands, and all attackers were freed in short order. Fidel served 18 months of a 15-year sentence.

In contrast, during the 51-year Castro regime, political prisoners have typically been sentenced to decades in jail and sentences are often extended once completed. Treatment has been consistently appalling -- hard labor, torture, beatings, malnourishment, denial of medical care, abuses of all kinds, and even killings at the hands of guards. Punishment cells are particularly horrifying.

Hundreds of political prisoners at a time have resorted to hunger strikes to pressure a regime that only bends to suit its carefully crafted public image. Their ironclad conviction and willpower sometimes leads to improvements, often temporary.

Cuba currently has around 200 political prisoners; many are so ill that their life is at stake. Ariel Sigler, 46, a former boxing champion, entered prison in 2003 strong and fit. Today, he is a near skeleton, paralyzed from the waist down and dying of an undiagnosed condition. His litany of ailments includes severe abdominal and throat pain, profuse rectal bleeding, intense headaches, painful urination and more.

Mysterious illnesses

Many prisoners in facilities islandwide develop a similarly mysterious pattern of illness beginning with impaired digestive absorption. The files of the defunct East German Secret Police, Stasi, reveal widespread cooperation with its Cuban counterparts, including training in repressing prisoners. Collaboration with former Communist Bulgaria reportedly centered on toxic substances. It is not farfetched to think that slow poisoning is part of the methodology of targeted terror. Prisoners have long reported tainted food and mysterious injections.

Juan Carlos González Leiva heads the Cuban Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, founded in 2007 to gather information on human-rights abuses throughout the island. Leiva reports around 250 penitentiary facilities and 300 police detention centers holding an estimated 100,000 people.

Monthly salary of \$18

Most are confined for economic crimes -- primarily theft, "sacrificing cattle" and black-market activities. Failed socialist central planning and state ownership of practically all means of production, coupled with an average monthly salary of \$18, leave hardly any alternatives to secure basic sustenance. Hundreds also land in jail for the unique "crime" of "pre-criminal dangerousness," a proclivity to disturb the social order. They would be considered political prisoners if their names and stories were known.

Cuba's prisons breed rampant disease, ghastly acts of self-mutilation, mental disorders and extreme suffering for prisoners and their families. Knowing exactly what goes on is impossible, however, because the Red Cross and international monitoring groups cannot inspect and the Cuban government provides no data.

The Council monitors 40 prisons via reports from political prisoners, representing 16 percent of total penitentiaries. From 2007 to 2009, it reported at least 39 suicides or alleged suicides, 53 deaths for medical negligence and seven extrajudicial killings by guards.

Most of the victims were young men, their stories ignored. In 2007, for example, Manuel Diende Rosa went on hunger strike at a Camagüey prison to demand his rights and reportedly committed suicide in a punishment cell. Extrapolating 99 deaths from 16 percent of monitored prisons and excluding police holding centers, we determine that 618 preventable deaths may have occurred in prisons from 2007 to 2009. This is alarming and widely ignored.

Maria C. Werlau is executive director of Cuba Archive, a nonprofit project documenting the loss of life during the Cuban revolution.

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