

## Cuba: border guard killings at Guántanamo

**Iskander Maleras Pedraza**, age 26, (top photo) and **Luis Angel Valverde**, age 33, (bottom photo) were shot to death by Cuban border guards on January 19, 1994 while trying to reach the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo, Cuba, to request asylum.



They were residents of Guantánamo, Cuba. Maleras, the youngest of three siblings, was very generous, had many friends, and was an avid cyclist. He had been repeatedly harassed and threatened by police, State Security, and neighborhood Communist Party watchdogs, for openly declaring his opposition to the Castro regime. Detained on numerous occasions, on one occasion, he had endured three months of prison on a fabricated charge of stealing horses. The case had been thrown out on trial only when another plaintiff testified the parties did not know Maleras and had been instructed to lie about his involvement.



Valverde, known as “Gelín,” was a physical education teacher. He was desperate about the situation in Cuba and tried to leave the country unsuccessfully on three occasions, which is punishable with years of prison. The previous month, he had been caught during an “illegal” exit attempt and was to go to trial in January. He had a wife and two young children. Wanting a better future for his family, he hoped to reach the U.S. to later bring them from Cuba.

On January 19, 1994, Maleras, Valverde and two friends, Luis Gustavo Matos and Eduardo Serante González, tried trying to reach the Guantánamo Naval Base by raft. Maleras did not know how to swim and was on top of the very small raft as the others pulled it swimming towards the U.S. naval base. When they were about 50 meters from the shore of the base, two Cuban border guards (José Barceló Escalona and Iván Fuentes Ramírez), opened fire with AKMs, killing Maleras and Valverde. Matos and Serante pled for clemency and took cover under water. Matos was injured on one foot and left to bleed to death but swam away at nightfall, making it to the U.S. base. Serante was captured, tried, and

sentenced to house arrest. He later went into exile in the United States.

The government refused to return the bodies of Maleras and Valverde to their families for a funeral. Instead, the parents were told to come alone to the Guantánamo Cemetery, where the two were buried naked (as retribution) in unmarked graves in an area designated for victims of exit attempts to the U.S. base (killed by Cuban border guards or mines).

The events caused great commotion in the city of Guantánamo, as their families were well known and respected. Authorities did not allow visits to their homes or the cemetery and posted patrols on the streets. The border guards were given awards for “doing their duty” and prominent government figures went on local radio and TV to denounce the young men as “traitors, counter-revolutionaries and anti-social elements.” Soon after the killings, a local school had on display the photos of the bodies ravaged by bullets to impress upon the children the high cost of attempting to escape to the U.S. base.

Maleras' sister was fired from her job as a music teacher at the university and was unable to find employment due to the stigma that befell the family. They endured so much harassment from the government that they sought political asylum in the United States. His mother's sense of loss is incalculable and she says will not rest until she finds justice for her son.



*Nilda Maleras and her mother, Eulalia Nilda Pedraza.*

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