

## Repression of scientists and health professionals in revolutionary Cuba

June 17, 2021

In Cuba, independent professional activities are not allowed in the medical and scientific fields and repression of scientists and medical doctors/researchers has been a standard practice throughout the revolutionary government. Even top scientists and doctors who do not conform to the government's diktats face punishments that include withheld wages, expulsion from their work at universities, hospitals, and other research/academic institutions, suspension of their credentials to work, and prohibition from leaving the country; some have faced imprisonment, death, or disappearance.

Laws and regulations restrict and punish activities or opinions deemed contrary to the Communist state, and scientists and health professionals, considered "essential" workers to national security, are subject to the following, among others:

- Article 4 of the Constitution establishes that "the defense of the socialist homeland is the greatest honor and supreme duty of every Cuban" and treason against the fatherland leads to sever sanctions "against anyone who tries to overthrow the political, social and economic order established by the Constitution." In 2020-2021, the regime has increasingly threatened to begin applying this article to dissidents.<sup>1</sup>
- Decree Law 88 on "The Protection of the National Independence and the Economy of Cuba" of February 16, 1999,<sup>2</sup> is a "gag law ("ley mordaza") applying to all citizens used frequently against dissidents.<sup>3</sup> Its section on "crimes against honor" punishes with up to one year of prison anything considered defamation of the institutions, political organizations, and "heroes or martyrs of the Republic." The law's stated purpose is "to sanction acts aimed at supporting, facilitating, or collaborating with the objectives of the Helms-Burton Act, the blockade, and the economic war against our people aimed at breaking the internal order, destabilizing the country, and liquidating the Socialist State and the independence of Cuba."
- The Migration Law, No. 302, imposes (Art. 25, subpara f.) a general prohibition on certain professionals from leaving the national territory without meeting very strict requirements, "by virtue of preserving the necessary workforce for the economic, social and scientific-technical development of the country and for the security and protection of official information."<sup>4</sup> Scientists and doctors, thus, face great hurdles to leave the country and obtain authorization for even short visits abroad. Cuba's Penal Code prohibits all citizens from leaving the country without government authorization and imposes penalties of up to four years of prison for attempting to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> "¿Se está preparando el régimen cubano para aplicar el Artículo 4 de la Constitución?" Madrid, *Diario de Cuba*, Dic, 3, 2020; Yusimí Rodríguez López, "Artículo 4 de la Constitución cubana, una herramienta para llamar a la violencia y restringir derechos," Madrid, *Diario de Cuba*, Apr. 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ley de Protección a la Independencia Nacional y la Economía de Cuba, Asamblea del Poder Popular, República de Cuba, <https://tinyurl.com/3vm9ura2>.

<sup>3</sup> "Otro activista cubano sufre amenazas de ir a prisión en virtud de la 'Ley Mordaza'," *Diario de Cuba*, Santiago de Cuba, Apr. 21, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Decreto-Ley No. 302 Modificativo de la Ley No. 1312, "Ley de Migración" de 20 de septiembre de 1976, *Gaceta Oficial*, Oct. 6, 2012, p. 1357.

- The “Special Regulation for Medical Students”<sup>5</sup> of March 12, 1982 applies to all students of medical sciences. It stipulates that all health professionals must “serve the Revolution” and that education in medical sciences is exclusive to persons with “revolutionary vocation” whose political and moral principles are aligned with the government.<sup>6</sup> Students of medical sciences must demonstrate “unconditionality” (unconditional loyalty) towards their assigned tasks as well as international proletarianism, strict compliance with the values of the socialist society, profound collectivist sentiments, and respect for socialist legality. They must express their disposition and permanent commitment to serve the Revolution unconditionally anywhere in the national territory or abroad (Art. 11).<sup>7</sup> Any manifested contrarian attitude to the socialist revolution and its ideology or failure to comply with any duties, including the armed defense of the country, are considered grave faults that entail consequences (Art. 47).
- Regulation No. 168, “Disciplinary Regulation for Cuban civil workers who provide services abroad as collaborators,” regulates the conduct of all individuals working overseas for the Cuban State, of which around 30,000 are health workers, through numerous arbitrary restrictions and disciplinary actions. In addition to imposing on them political duties, they are forbidden from any expressions contrary to the Revolution and may not associate in the host country with anyone not supportive of revolutionary ideals or speak to any member of the media except as instructed.

### Selected cases of political persecution of scientists and doctors

*In alphabetical order*

Following are cases of scientists and doctors who have suffered serious reprisals for questioning the regime but have remained firm in telling their truth and defending human rights.



**Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet**<sup>8</sup> obtained his degree in internal medicine in 1985. In 1986, he was suspended from the practice of medicine for opposing the long work hours without pay forced on Cuban physicians. In 1987, he returned to practicing and teaching medicine at the Obstetric Pediatric Hospital “Hijas de Galicia” in Havana. A pacifist and devout Christian, he began to denounce the unethical practice of pressuring women with problem pregnancies to abort, often just moments before birth, to keep infant mortality rates low. He also denounced the use of Rivanol for late term abortions, a drug that produces 'mini labor' and resulted in viable fetuses being born alive. He claimed that “the babies’ umbilical cord was cut and they were left to bleed to death or wrapped in paper and asphyxiated.” Biscet was terminated from his job and stripped of his medical license; his wife lost her nursing job, the family lost their home, and government goons beat him. This only prompted his more active resistance and repeated incarcerations during which he was often held in windowless cells or thrown in with violent criminals and the mentally ill. In February 2000, he was sentenced to 3 years in prison for announcing a peaceful march for the 1999 Ibero-American Summit in Havana where he used as backdrop two Cuban flags hung upside. He was convicted for “dishonoring national symbols, public disorder, and inciting delinquent behavior.” Released in October 2002, after serving his sentence, he was re-arrested 36 days and sentenced to 25 years in prison for “serving as a mercenary to a foreign state.” He was released 8 years later through a Catholic Church negotiation after having been held mostly in isolation in a phone-booth-sized and vermin-infested windowless cell with no running water or toilet. To date, Biscet has refused exile.

<sup>5</sup> The regulation has a “revolutionary” name: Special Regulation for Medical Students of “the Carlos J. Finlay Detachment.”

<sup>6</sup> “Restricciones a la libertad académica y otros derechos humanos de los universitarios en Cuba,” *Informa*, Observatorio de Libertad Académica, Feb. 2021, pp. 9, 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.oscarscuba.com/who-is-dr-biscet/>; Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, <https://www.freedom-now.org/cases/dr-oscar-elias-biscet/>; Mary Anastasia O'Grady, “A Cuban hero,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, 2007; Michael Gerson, Oscar Biscet, a Cuban doctor who remains defiant, *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2016; Dr. “Oscar Biscet: A profile in courage from Cuba,” *Washington Examiner*, June 10, 2016; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar\\_El%C3%ADas\\_Biscet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_El%C3%ADas_Biscet).



**Oscar Casanella**, a biochemist and cancer researcher was terminated in 2016 from his work at the National Institute for Oncology and Radiobiology and from his unpaid position as professor of Molecular Biology for associating with members of Cuba's peaceful opposition. He did not belong to any political groups and claimed the charges were fabricated. At his October 2016 labor trial, he was denied witnesses for his defense and his family was not allowed to attend but his expulsion was confirmed.<sup>9</sup> Casanella started to participate in civil society activities after his expulsion and has endured several arbitrary detentions, constant harassment, threats, surveillance, and blocked cell phone communications.<sup>10</sup>



The late **Dr. Darsi Ferret**<sup>11</sup> was removed from the practice of medicine in 2006 and refused any form of gainful employment for denouncing the country's abysmal state of healthcare. He established an independent health and human rights clinic (Juan Bruno Zayas Center for Health and Human Rights) in his home city of Havana to offer free medical attention to those in need and to visit very poor communities and offer health services, medicine, clothing, and toys. He and his wife led several peaceful demonstrations that were severely repressed by political police and with their small son they were regularly harassed and terrorized by "repudiation squads," government-organized violent mobs unleashed against non-conformists. In 2009, he was sentenced to prison for the alleged crime of buying building materials for his house in the informal market, for which Amnesty International declared him a "prisoner of conscience." He went on hunger strike and was released in June 2010. In 2012, he emigrated as a political refugee to the United States to escape persistent political persecution and died in 2017 in Palm Beach, Florida, at the age of 47 of a reported heart attack.



**Dr. Alexander Figueredo Izaguirre**, a General Internist since 2008, worked at a clinic in the eastern city of Bayamo when he started posting on his Facebook page<sup>12</sup> increasingly critical commentary of the public health system and the lack of basic medical supplies and medications. On April 26, 2021, he was terminated from his employment and forbidden from practicing his profession for at least five years. The written notification cites a Resolution from Bayamo's Municipal Department of Health "in accordance with article 159 of Law 116, "Labor Code," issued by the Assembly of People's Power on December 20, 2013, that punishes conduct contrary to "the moral and ideological principles of our society." The missive claims that he had violated labor discipline by "disseminating opinions and criteria that undermined the prestige and principals of the Cuban health system and its professionals in exposing what he considered irregularities in the health sector"... "in violation of the established labor regime."<sup>13</sup> His behavior is characterized as "negligent" and "perhaps criminal."

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<sup>9</sup> Yanelys Núñez Leyva, "El juicio de Oscar Casanella, un bioquímico expulsado de su trabajo," *Havana Times*, Oct. 24, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> "Seguridad del Estado siguió y detuvo en plena calle al científico cubano Oscar Casanella," *CiberCuba*, Apr. 23, 2021; Oscar Casanella, un científico cubano expulsado de su trabajo por motivos políticos, Sep. 12, 2020, *ADN Cuba*.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Anastasia O'Grady, "Cuban doctor pays a high price for truth," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2006; "Darsi Ferret dies in Miami," *Translating Cuba/14ymedio*, Oct. 7, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See Alexander Jesus Figueredo Izaguirre's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/alexander.figueredo.94214>.

<sup>13</sup> Three-page letter, Resolution 82, from the Municipal Department of Health, "Organ of People's Power," of Bayamo, signed by the Director, Dra. Irais Coober Cadrelo. (Translated from Spanish.)



**Dr. Manuel Guerra**, a medical doctor from the eastern province of Holguín, was arrested by State Security agents and police on November 29, 2020 after a police siege of his home during which several individuals entering his house violently and jumped on him to snatch the cell phone as he was transmitting the arrest. He was released hours later but has faced constant harassment from the political police and several of his acquaintances and colleagues at the Nicodemus Regalado Municipal Hospital, where he works, were interrogated. A neighbor was criticized at his workplace for posting a positive reaction to the doctor's post on social media and was forced to unfriend him on Facebook.<sup>14</sup>



**Dr. Dessy Mendoza**<sup>15</sup> had established the Independent Medical Association of Santiago de Cuba in 1994. A short time later, he lost his job. In 1997, he told international news agencies that authorities had covered up and failed to take adequate measures to control a dengue epidemic, which had caused several deaths in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba. He was arrested and months later, in 1998, sentenced to eight years in prison for “spreading enemy propaganda” with his reports on the dengue fever epidemic.<sup>16</sup> At the time he was 42 years old, married, and the father of four children. Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience. Two journalists from independent news agencies were also arrested, interrogated, and threatened with imprisonment for writing articles on the dengue epidemic. Dr. Mendoza had to choose exile to escape political persecution.



**Dr. Hilda Molina**,<sup>17</sup> a neurosurgeon, resigned in 1994 from CIREN, Cuba’s International Center for Neurological Restoration, which she had helped found and served as director since 1990. She also resigned from her position in the national legislature (Assembly of People’s Power) and the Federation of Cuban Women. Her disagreements with the political authorities included having the Center’s scientific publications banned and being pressured into recruiting certain scientists and into engaging in “unethical, shameful and inhumane” practices. She denounced “fraudulent and corrupt relations between Cuban authorities and their foreign correspondents” that had turned the Cuban medical system into “a profit-making enterprise for the Cuban state.” Among the practices she objected to were deceiving unwitting donors into having cesarean sections to obtain fetal tissue and serve a flourishing transplant business for export, pressuring foreign patients into unnecessary medical treatments to increase earnings, and asking Cuban doctors to perform surgical procedures they had not mastered. The Cuban government prevented Dr. Molina from leaving the country until 2009 when, thanks to a long international campaign on her behalf, she left for Argentina to join her son and his family. There, she wrote a book (*Mi verdad*, 2010), founded a civil rights organization<sup>18</sup> and actively lectures on her experiences in Cuba and the absence of freedoms on the island.

<sup>14</sup> “Tres médicos contestatarios desafían al gobierno en las redes sociales,” *Yucabyte*, Mar. 10, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> “Cuba: Medical Action: Dr. Desi Mendoza Rivero,” Amnesty International, Aug. 18, 1997 (Index number: AMR 25/028/1997); Kelly Morris, “Cuban doctor imprisoned for 8 years for reporting dengue-fever epidemic,” *The Lancet*, Vol. 350, Issue 9093, Dec. 13, 1997, p. 1759.

<sup>16</sup> K. Morris, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Vincent, “For Cubans, a bitter pill,” Morón, Cuba, *National Post*, July 7, 2004; Mauricio Rubio, “Una brillante médica cubana,” *El Espectador*, Mar. 15, 2017; <https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/una-brillante-medica-cubana-columna-684748/>; Dr. Hilda Molina, “Cuban Medicine Today,” *Futuro de Cuba*, not dated, [http://www.futurodecuba.org/ARticle%20by%20Dra\\_%20Molina.htm](http://www.futurodecuba.org/ARticle%20by%20Dra_%20Molina.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Crecer en Libertad, <http://crecerenlibertad.com.ar/>.



**Roberto Pereda López**, a research scientist at the National Center for Scientific Investigations (CENIC) in Havana, disappeared September 26, 1972, presumably with the involvement of state agents. He had refused to carry out certain scientific work and openly declared his opposition to the government. Having told his family his life was at risk, one day he left for work and was never seen again. He was in his forties and had two sons, ages 12 and 13. His close friendship with Cuban scientist Yamil Kourí had also raised flags against him. In the 1960s Kourí had sought asylum in the Mexican Embassy in Cuba but had been handed over to the Cuban government and sentenced to death. His life was spared thanks to a family connection but he served eleven years in prison until 1979.<sup>19</sup>



**Dr. Johan Pérez Leyva**, a General Internist from Las Tunas, was interrogated in February 2021 by a State Security official, a policeman, and two bureaucrats from the public health system regarding his social media posts denouncing the scarcity of medicine and medical supplies in the province of Las Tunas and highlighting the case of an elderly man. He was sanctioned with a 10% reduction in his salary and threatened with worse consequences.



**Dr. Alexander Pupo Casas.**<sup>20</sup> In September 2020, Dr. Pupo posted on Facebook photos of Cuban medical facilities showing the condition of those installations and making critical comments on the health system, adding “not believing in Communism does not make me a bad doctor.” A Disciplinary Commission was created to judge him and he was terminated from his residency in neurosurgery at the Ernesto Guevara Hospital of Las Tunas. He faced increasing persecution and threats from government authorities, including to his family, and his telephone (home and mobile) communications had been cut off.



**Ariel Ruíz Urquiola**, a Ph.D. in Biological Sciences specialized in cellular and molecular biology, conducted research that attributed to the Cuban government environmental damage as well as erroneous breast cancer treatment. This attracted international attention and led to corrective measures by authorities. Dr. Ruíz Urquiola was punished with the withdrawal of his doctoral degree and expelled from the university. He decided to establish an environmental center/organic farm in Pinar del Río province. The project was forbidden by authorities and the political police killed animals from his farm and poisoned the well water. When his sister, a breast cancer patient, was denied her cancer medicine in reprisal, he embarked on a protest hunger and thirst strike in front of the National Institute of

Oncology and Radiobiology. He was detained on three occasions but the cancer treatment was provided. In May 2018, after two policemen staged an incident to accuse him of disrespect, he was sentenced to prison for twelve months and designated prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. Having embarked on another hunger strike, in June 2018 he was admitted to the hospital and released early the following month on a medical license. In June 2019, he discovered he was HIV positive and subsequent medical tests in Switzerland demonstrated that he had been purposefully infected during his imprisonment. Dr. Urquiola presented a formal

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<sup>19</sup> Cuba Archive, personal and telephone interviews with son, 2006 and 2007; Written testimony of Alex Pereda (son) for Cuba Archive, April 10, 2006; <http://database.cubaarchive.org/case-record-simple-search/6662/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Doctor cubano Alexander Pupo: No creer en el comunismo no me hace mal médico,” *CiberCuba*, Sep. 28, 2020; “Dr. Alexander Pupo explica por qué no considera a Cuba una potencia médica,” *CiberCuba*, Feb. 25, 2021; “Alexander Pupo denuncia “chantajes” ante sus reclamos para volver a ejercer como médico,” *ADN Cuba*, Nov. 9, 2020; “Régimen amenaza e intercepta móvil a galeno disidente,” *Radio Televisión Martí*, May 10, 2021.

complaint before the UN High Commission for Human Rights against the Cuban State for the crime against humanity of inoculating him with HIV.<sup>21</sup>

### More victims



The long reach of the Cuban regime is extraterritorial and may be behind the murder of **Manuel Ramírez**, a defector from Cuba, and his wife, **Liliam Morales**. The couple was shot execution-style inside their car in Coral Gables, Florida, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1995 in what the police believe was a targeted assassination. Ramírez had been the head of the Havana branch of Cuba's top state construction firm, UNECA, and had led key construction projects, including of biotechnology facilities. Ramírez had defected from Cuba in 1991 during a visit to Moscow and had been granted asylum in the United States. He was to testify at the U.S. Congress at a hearing on Cuba's bioweapons capabilities organized two weeks before the murder. A four-page report he had prepared for the occasion provided details of top-security biological laboratories built at the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB) in Havana and said that Cuba had the facilities and know-how to develop biological weapons for sale or to threaten or attack other countries. Although the perpetrator of the killing was never found, in 2004 a former Cuban government official told *El Nuevo Herald* that the Cuban government had been monitoring Ramírez and Morales through two collaborators before ordering the murder. The perpetrator was reportedly a Cuban nicknamed "el indio," who had been in jail in Cuba for petty theft and had emigrated to the U.S. during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 with permission to traffic narcotics from Cuba to South Florida.<sup>22</sup>

There are many more cases of repression in the scientific and medical field. The recently-established Observatory for Academic Freedom is documenting incidents of overt repression in higher learning in Cuba and has an incipient list of learning institutions at which violations have occurred; it includes University of Medical Sciences of Havana, the Ernesto Guevara Hospital in Las Tunas, the Health Administration Division for the province of Las Tunas, and the School of Medical Sciences Manuel "Piti" Fajardo.<sup>23</sup> The documented reprisals are extensive and include unjustified expulsion or termination from work or study, harassment and persecution, searches of personal property, acts of repudiation, defamation, restrictions from leaving the country, threats, intimidation, detentions without due process, illegal or unjustified surveillance, and interference in communications, and discrimination in the access to education, food, housing, health services and others.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, thousands of doctors and nurses from Cuban internationalist medical brigades have denounced systematic abuses and exploitation that the Cuban state subjects them to in collusion with hosting governments and international organizations including the World Health Organization and the PanAmerican Health Organization. Cuba's health "internationalists," currently estimated at around 30,000, are considered victims of trafficking in persons. Regulation No.168, "Disciplinary Regulation for Cuban civil workers who provide services abroad as collaborators," regulates their conduct and contains numerous arbitrary restrictions and disciplinary actions. In addition to imposed political and professional duties, the health workers are forbidden from any expressions contrary to the Revolution and may not associate with any person in the host country who is not supportive of revolutionary ideals, leave home after certain hours, or speak to any member of the media except as instructed. Among other abuses they report are lacking the qualifications for certain medical

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<sup>21</sup> "I was purposely infected with HIV in prison by agents of the Cuban state", International Society for Human Rights, <https://ishr.org/i-was-purposely-infected-with-hiv-in-prison-by-agents-of-the-cuban-state/>; Vicente Morin Aguado, "Ariel Ruiz Urquiola: 'I never wanted to be a zombie,'" *Havana Times*, Jul. 29, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Juan O. Tamayo, "A cold case with connections to Cuba?," *The Miami Herald*, Apr. 5, 2014; "Luisa Yanes, Radio astrologer, husband gunned down," Coral Gables, *Sun Sentinel*, Feb. 2, 1995; Karen Testa, "Cuban radio psychic, husband, shot to death outside station," *Associated Press*, Feb. 2, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> See "Restricciones a la libertad académica," op. cit., <https://www.olacademica.org/estad%C3%ADsticas>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

care assigned to them, as well as the systematic overbilling to host governments for inexistent patients as well as requiring them to deliver unnecessary health services.<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>25</sup> See CubaSalud.org (in English and/or Spanish for details) and, in particular, “Fact Sheet: Overview of Cuba’s medical “collaboration,” Cuba Archive, June 15, 2020; Forced/compelled labor (trafficking in persons), <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FACT-SHEET-Cubas-Medical-Diplomacy-1.pdf>; and Maria C. Werlau, “Cuba’s “internationalist medical missions”: Information for the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report,” Free Society Project/Cuba Archive and Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, <https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-TIP-Cuba-Information-Submission-Final.pdf>.