

Cuba: Strange accidents and other unexplained deaths—are Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero the latest victims of state-sponsored killings?

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July 29, 2012

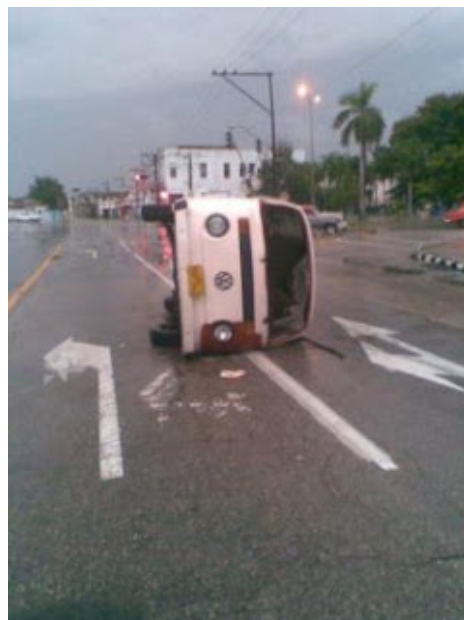


Oswaldo Payá, age 60, was killed Sunday July 22nd in a car crash. Founder and leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (known for its Spanish abbreviation MCL), he was regarded as Cuba's leading dissident leader with many prestigious international awards and several nominations to the Nobel Peace Prize. Also killed was **Harold Cepero**, a 32-year old activist from the movement. They had been traveling in a rental car in Cuba's eastern Granma province with two foreign visitors—Angel Carronero, member of the youth branch of Spain's Popular Party, and Aron Modig, President of the Christian Democrat Youth League of Sweden, both 27. Their visit to the province coincided with a cholera outbreak, a matter of such sensitivity to the government that the day after the crash, in a speech at the National Assembly, President Raúl Castro complained of growing propaganda cam-paigns and distortions to discredit the country's health system and its worldwide reputation.

Initially, Cuba's Foreign Ministry confirmed Paya's death and said authorities were investigating the crash, stating that eyewitnesses had reported the car had lost control and crashed into a tree. Hospital sources said that Payá had arrived dead, Cepero had died a few hours after his arrival, and the two foreigners had suffered only minor injuries. From the very first reports, Paya's wife and children in Havana have indicated they did not believe there had been an "accident" because the two foreigners had sent word they were being pursued and, subsequently, that their car had been rammed by another vehicle and forced off the road, hitting a tree. (Find first audio statements (Spanish) by Paya's wife, Ofelia. at <http://www.martinoticias.com/content/paya-esposa-ofelia-acevedo/13044.html> and his daughter at <http://www.goeur.com/listen/f42b3b2/rosa-maria-paya-accidente-de-su-padre-oswaldo-paya-mcl>.)

Five days after the crash, on July 27th, Cuba's Ministry of the Interior issued a communiqué stating that there had been three passersby as witnesses to the accident and that an investigation conducted by four experts, all Cuban government officials, had "categorically" concluded the accident had been caused by the driver's lack of attention (not heeding signs to slow down due to road work), excess speed, and abruptly applying the breaks upon reaching a slippery surface (a stretch of unpaved road in repair). The car's speed, it claimed, could have been no less than 120 kilometers per hour. But, Payá's family quickly dismissed this statement and insisted on a hearing with the survivors, who they reiterated had sent text messages of being forced off the road by another vehicle. A spokesperson for the MCL stated that the organization and the family did not accept the official version and demanded a serious, impartial, and transparent investigation they could trust. He explained: "We will not accept assertions made under pressure or by persons interested in conveying the official version. In Cuba, we know, mechanisms of pressure and blackmail are employed by the state, the military junta, and the security forces that do their dirty work." To date, authorities have not provided the family any information other than a momentary verbal explanation by an officer delivering Payá's body that excessive speed had caused the accident and that there had been two witnesses. His belongings, which included a video camera, have yet to be returned.

The two survivors have not been publicly seen or heard from. Since the accident, Carromero has been in police custody while Modig remains detained by immigration authorities, apparently for violating terms of his tourist visa. Presumably hoping for a diplomatic solution, at first their governments only brief statements expressing confidence they would soon return home. Almost a week after the crash, they made guarded public statements that they had not been allowed to see them for days and the Swedish government questioned why their citizen was being held.



The Payá family has expressed its longstanding fear for his safety, as he was constantly under surveillance, harassed, followed, and threatened with death by Cuba's political police, all of which had intensified as of late. On June 2nd, Payá and his wife were traveling in their 1964 VW van on the outskirts of Havana when it was hit forcefully from behind by another vehicle. The car flipped and was badly damaged, however they escaped without serious injury and decided to downplay the apparently deliberate act. The MCL's longstanding policy has been to not serve as echo of the terror the regime intends to spread.

Perfect crimes or extraordinary coincidences?

Cuba Archive has received reports of a number of deaths of detractors of the Cuban regime—in Cuba and in several countries— shrouded in mysterious circumstances. Some are featured in our electronic database of documented cases (www.CubaArchive.org/database/), but most are not for lack of evidence. There are also a number of credible first-hand reports of seeming attempts against the lives of human rights' defenders in Cuba, many perpetrated with vehicles.

Systematic recording of these occurrences—whether in Cuba or abroad—has not existed, particularly when the target has survived. Cuba Archive's Truth and Memory project, for example, only records cases of death or disappearance, not incidents affecting people who survive. Therefore, the actual number of occurrences is probably considerably greater than imagined.

A decisive pattern emerges from the known cases—only some summarized herein—that defies odds and points strongly to state-sponsored killings or attempted killings. This should not come as a surprise. The surviving archives of totalitarian regimes similar to Cuba's of the former Soviet bloc—to which Cuba long belonged— have documented proof of many operations similar to the ones described herein. Cuba's intelligence services, as those archives prove, had close ties and joint training, strategies, and operations with the secret police of East Germany (Stasi), Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and others that specialized in techniques to repress and silence the internal opposition and eliminate opponents worldwide. While most of these countries have built democratic societies since the fall of Communism, Cuba's rulers, Communist Constitution, and repressive machinery remain in place.

The deliberateness and ultimate responsibility of these occurrences are very difficult to establish, most leave little or no tracks, and the perpetrators are seldom seen, much less apprehended. Most of the surviving victims realize they have been targeted, but can rarely prove it. Often they have no record or sufficient evidence that the event actually took place. The incidents are usually dismissed or quickly forgotten. In Cuba, where the incidents are more brazen and overt, twice targeted Juan Francisco Sigler, explains: "We have no protection, no one to turn to for help. The police does nothing when we make claims—they are the police." Abroad, Miguel Sales—a writer who escaped one such attempt in Paris— illustrates the futility of seeking redress: "The perpetrator, if one were to be found, would have been a lowly hit man with no connection to Cuban espionage services, perhaps a marginal foreigner who had a few drinks that night and was probably driving without a license. In the worst case for him, a charge of involuntary manslaughter would entail a prison sentence of a few years that would turn into a few months thanks to sentencing reductions. He would then return to his country and get his payment. Twenty thousand dollars is not



a lot in Paris, but it is a small fortune in Syria, Nicaragua, or Cameroon. Contrary to what we see in police flicks, the perfect crime does exist..."

Evidence of the Cuban regime's practice of eliminating opponents can be found in accounts—some published in different venues—of former insiders who have defected and are now living abroad. Many are in hiding or with changed identities for fear of becoming victims. But there is at least one case known to this author in which the perpetrator later came forward. It involved **Father Miguel Loredo**, a Cuban Catholic priest who died in exile in 2011. He had served over nine years of political prison falsely accused of aiding a counter-revolutionary and sheltering him at his church. After his release in 1976, the regime apparently continued to consider him a threat; he was a very charismatic and popular priest, especially among the youth, which was very unwelcome in a state that had outlawed religion. In 1982, he was run over by a truck during his daily walk from one church to another in Havana. He survived, but badly injured, and the driver was not prosecuted. But, years later, he went to Father Loredo's parish to ask for his forgiveness, confessing he had been forced into doing the deed.

Mysterious deaths, strange "accidents," and abrupt mortal illnesses

Some examples follow from scores of similar cases spread out over five decades.

I. Six Recent Cases in Cuba



In 2009, **Laura Pollán**, leader of Cuba's Ladies in White, was riding in a car on a highway near Havana giving an interview to Italian filmmaker Pierantonio Micciarelli accompanied by a cameraman and an independent journalist. Suddenly and ostensibly with deliberateness, a vehicle crashed into their car forcing it off the road, then sped away. (See videos of crash at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJJCndCGSsw and Micciarelli's remarks at youtube.com/watch?v=dmpP34WfxNY&feature=related.)

Not long afterwards, on October 14, 2011, Laura died at age 63 of a sudden unexplained illness. Healthy and active despite a diabetes she controlled with medication, she became increasingly ill with chills, vomiting, joint pain, fever, and, eventually, shortness of breath.

Numerous medical tests failed to shed a cause or allow doctors to establish a diagnosis. Her condition quickly worsened, even after her hospitalization. In short order, she died. The official cause of death was listed as diabetes mellitus type 2, bronchopneumonia, and syncytial virus, yet bronchopneumonia was not the initial unexplained ailment and the others rarely cause death, much less one like hers. As she had become increasingly ill, the family had asked doctors about potential exposure to a toxin or germ. Since 2009, members of the Ladies in White have been reporting being pricked with needles by regime supporters and soon developing physical ailments. Less than a month earlier, on September 24th, she and a group of Ladies in White had been attacked by a government-led mob as they tried to leave her house to attend Mass. See photos at <http://alanacubana1962.blogspot.com/2011/09/cuba-fotos-pruebas-graficas-de.html>. Laura had been bitten, pinched, and scratched.



Laura died in the evening and the political police rushed her body to a brief autopsy immediately after which a midnight wake was allowed for just over an hour. The body was then taken for cremation. The family was not allowed to witness the send-off into the chamber (around 2AM) and in less than two hours was handed the ashes, which

were not hot. This timeframe would be impossible with even the latest cremation equipment, plus the ashes would not have been sufficiently cool for handling. Given her high public profile and puzzling illness, the absence of a diagnosis, and the questions raised by the family, this quick disposal of the body (less than ten hours after death) is illogical if the regime had nothing to hide. A few days afterwards, as a dissident was being released from a 2-day detention, a well-known State Security officer (Fernando Tamayo Gómez) threatened him with these words: “We killed Laura; we can do the same with you and nothing happens.” He had been one of the key security police figures managing Laura’s case at the hospital and after her death. Whether it was true or just opportunistic to scare is anyone’s guess.

Human rights activist **Liborio Borroto**, age 65, was killed November 19, 2007 at Jatibonico, province of Sancti Spiritus, after he was run over by a horse-drawn cart in what was officially reported as an accident. Borroto was President of the Democratic Party 30th of November for Jatibonico and member of the Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, both outlawed in Cuba. Earlier that same day three Communist Party members had visited his home to threaten him for placing stickers with the word “Change” on the walls of his house. (See case #10008 at www.CubaArchive.org/database/.)



Ladies in White co-founder, **Dolia Leal**, survived a furtive car accident in 2007. She had been warned by a State Security agent to tone down her activism or she could suffer a car accident. About 20 days later, on June 15, 2007, she was a passenger in a car with her neighbor and his mother on the way to the Combinado del Este prison of Havana to visit her husband and their relative. A car traveling in the opposite direction reportedly made a U-Turn and crashed into their vehicle at high speed; the driver was reportedly a German citizen in a rental car. Dolia, riding in the back seat, suffered the brunt of the impact and lost consciousness. She suffered multiple facial and bodily blows, a bitten tongue, cuts to her lips, and a vitreous detachment in the right eye. After the accident, the German was not to be found and Germany’s diplomats in

Havana first said they had no reports of accidents by their nationals and later told her they could not discuss the case. Cuban authorities never responded to Dolia’s request for an investigation. (See details in “Alerts and Releases” at www.CubaArchive.org/.)

Since 2007, **Juan Francisco Sigler**, head of the extra-official opposition group *Movimiento Opción Alternativa* of Matanzas province has escaped two attempts to run him over. On January 25, 2007, he was heading for work riding his bicycle around 6AM, while it was still dark and foggy. He heard a car approaching at great speed and turned his head to look as it struck his bike. The brunt of the impact hit a supply box mounted on the bike, which he believes saved his life. As he lay sprawled on the ground, the car pulled over a few yards ahead in the deserted road with the lights off. Two men and one woman began yelling insults and these statements: “You were lucky this time, but we will squash you.” “Mercenary, we are going to kill you.” He took blows to the head and stomach and went to a clinic for treatment. Around three months later, in broad daylight a white car he recognized as part of the Matanzas government fleet attempted to run him over on the highway as he was walking his disabled bicycle. He managed to duck, but the car went over the bike’s tire and sped away.



Wilber Sigler Gonzalez, age 37, is the son of former political prisoner Juan Francisco Sigler, whose case is discussed above. The extended Sigler family is well known for its brave and unrelenting activism in Cuba’s peaceful opposition movement. In early 2012, a known regime official from Matanzas attempted to run him over with a truck, but he was able to duck by bolting towards the curb. The perpetrator stopped, stuck his head out the window to take a look, and sped away. Many people on the street witnessed the incident and yelled at the driver.

Dagoberto Santana, member of the Executive Board of the *Movimiento Opción Alternativa* of Matanzas, was heading home in his bicycle after visiting his mother last Mother’s Day, May 13th. A car hit him from behind and he was thrown to the curb. As he lay there stunned, the man driving the vehicle stopped and started yelling at him “lackey of the empire” and other insults.

II. Operations Abroad

Many suspected state-sponsored killings or attempted killings have taken place outside of Cuba, in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Most cases are never resolved. In very few cases, a diplomatic crisis has ensued.

Brian Latell, scholar and former CIA National Intelligence Officer for Latin America describes many assassinations ordered by Cuba in his 2012 book *Castro's Secrets: The CIA and Cuba's Intelligence Machine*. (The Miami Herald published a synopsis on 4/21/2012 titled "The hit teams that carried out Castro's vendettas.") Latell writes that illegals, surrogates of other nationalities, and Latin American terrorist and revolutionary groups are used as executioners controlled by Cuban intelligence for assassination operations on defectors, traitors, and "worthy enemies." Deniability is compounded by degrees of separation. He explains how operations against the best-protected targets are prepared: "Carefully screened, the foreign assassins are trained at secret Cuban bases, learning to kill in gangland-style hits, elaborately orchestrated paramilitary operations, commando strikes and sly poisonings." Some of the most sensitive missions have been carried out overseas against high-visibility targets such as former Latin American dictators Anastasio Somoza (Nicaragua) and Augusto Pinochet (Chile); in some cases, carefully screened Cubans are the selected assassins. Norberto Fuentes, formerly of the Castro brothers' inner circle, has written (see his book *Dulces Guerreros Cubanos*, Seix Barral: 1999) that Cuban hit teams sent overseas were led by former intelligence officer Antonio de la Guardia, who, in turn, was executed by Cuba in a 1989 internal purge linked to the Ochoa trial.

Latell describes defector accounts of a number of state-sponsored assassinations and attempted assassinations. One is the 1970 death by poisoning of Cuban defector **Miguel Roche**, living in Virginia, in the greater Washington, D.C. Roche, who was perfectly healthy, collapsed almost immediately after attending a lunch at a restaurant with "one or more mysterious Cubans." No police investigation was opened although the autopsy's toxicology report indicated that 90% of his hemoglobin had been contaminated, causing extreme inflammation and leading to respiratory failure (cyanide poisoning the likely culprit). Roche had received threatening letters indicating: "We know what you are doing, ...so one way or another, we will take care of you."

Cuba, Latell describes, also embarked on a campaign to eliminate those involved in Ché Guevara's 1967 capture and death in Bolivia. Four Bolivians were killed —two generals (**Gen. Joaquin Zenteno**, in Paris -1976, and **Gen. René Barrientos, former President**, in Bolivia -1969), an army intelligence officer (**Roberto Quintanilla**, in Hamburg -1971) and a peasant (**Honorato Rojas**, in Bolivia -1969).

Uncanny recurrence of out-of-control cars

Cuban writer/poet and former political prisoner **Miguel Sales** survived what he believed was an assassination attempt. He was also acquainted with three other exiles also targeted. Aside from the obvious benefit of silencing problematic voices, he explains the purported logic: "The idea of eliminating less prominent exiles coincides with the modality applied on the island. (...) This is less costly —in terms of international public opinion— but more effective in creating mass terror.

On January 17, 2007, Sales was working for UNESCO in Paris. In exile since 1979, he maintained his public and highly critical views of the Cuban regime. One evening, as he left his office and was crossing the street, a fast-approaching car with its lights off veered towards him and accelerated. He jumped forward, missing the car by two centimeters, and fell to the ground as it sped away. (See details, in Spanish, in Julián B. Sorel, "Cebras letales," CubaEncuentro.com, 30/01/2007. Sorel was Sales' pseudonym and the three cases that follow are described by him —two were independently known to this author.)

In 2003, **Manuel Antonio Sánchez**, was hit by a powerful motorcycle while crossing a centric Barcelona intersection. He died shortly afterwards from the injuries. The former Cuban Vice Minister had escaped a kidnapping attempt a few days after requesting political exile in Spain in 1985. The incident had taken place in plain daylight as he left a bank on a busy Madrid boulevard. Spanish police thwarted the kidnapping, several Cuban diplomats were expelled and a chilling of relations with Cuba ensued.

In the summer of 2005, internationally renowned Cuban painter **Guido Llinás**, living in exile in Paris since 1963, was crossing a Paris intersection when a powerful motorcycle ran him over. He arrived at the hospital in a coma and

died a month later. His highly critical position towards the Cuban regime was well known and his fame had been growing as his work was increasingly appraised.

In the summer of 2006, **Dr. Martha Frayde** was about to get into a taxi in Madrid when the vehicle accelerated suddenly and dragged her several meters. Despite her old age, she survived with a broken hip. Exiled in Spain, Frayde had been a close Castro collaborator since the early days of the revolution and had served in high-ranking government posts including Ambassador to UNESCO. She became publicly disaffected with the system and in 1976 was sentenced to 29 years of prison. Released in 1979, she settled in Madrid, where she founded an acclaimed magazine critical of the Castro regime.

In 2003, a **journalist covering Cuban issues** (wishing to remain anonymous), was crossing the street from her apartment building at a major U.S. city when a car stopped at the red light suddenly backed into her and sped away. She was thrown on the street and briefly lost consciousness, but escaped major injury. Two men were in the car and many passersby came to her aid, but she was too dazed at the scene to attempt finding so-disposed witnesses. She did not report it to police and did not tell friends about the incident for fear of seeming to embellish.

Alvaro Prendes, who died in 2004, had been a high-ranking Cuban Air Force pilot and celebrated revolutionary hero. When he began questioning his superiors and calling for reforms, he was stripped of his rank, imprisoned more than once, and later ostracized. He went into exile in the U.S. in 1994. One day, in broad daylight on a busy Miami street, a vehicle forcefully and deliberately struck his car and forced it off the road, speeding away. He crashed into a nearby structure and suffered injuries requiring hospital care. With a detailed accident report in hand, he repeatedly asked police and the FBI for an investigation to no avail.

III. Suspicious heart attacks and so-called suicides of estranged regime insiders

The list of disaffected regime insiders dying mysteriously is long. Some cases follow –the first two are described in greater detail in Latell’s book based on defector accounts:

Manuel Piñeiro, age 63. Longtime and legendary head of Cuba’s intelligence services, he had been retired in 1992 purportedly for straying from the rigid orthodoxies espoused by the Castro brothers. In March 1998, it was officially reported that he had been in a single-vehicle accident after fainting at the wheel while returning home from a reception in Havana. Though only suffering minor injuries, he had been kept in the hospital “for observation,” but had died in his bed of a heart attack. A day before the accident, his bodyguard-driver, had been instructed to take some time off. Defectors related that he had announced he was writing his memoirs and just knew too much.

José Abrantes, former Division General of the Armed Forces and former Interior Minister, had been sentenced to 20 years of prison during the General Ochoa purge of 1989, when dozens of intelligence and military officers were executed, imprisoned, or removed. Defectors reported he had been subjected to a special nutrition regime to weaken him (toxins were also allegedly added to his food) and concentrated doses and shots of potassium and digoxina had been administered that provoked a heart attack. Apparently, he was finished off in the ambulance to the hospital, asphyxiated with a pillow. No autopsy was performed and the family was not allowed to see the body.

The Cuban government has reported the following deaths as suicides (part of a much longer list):

Javier de Varona, age 34. Leading member of the Communist Youth Party arrested for his role in an infiltration of anti-regime elements into Cuba, he died under interrogation in 1969.

Manuel Méndez, age 35. MININT official and President of the Revolutionary Tribunal of Santa Clara arrested in July 1971 with no explanation given to the family. He died 29 days later in custody of a gunshot wound to the chest. The government claimed it was a suicide and produced a letter he had allegedly written confessing to an affair with a married woman, who denied it, and to have met with members of the Ministry of the Interior to discuss problems he blamed on the government.

Rodrigo Rojo, age 35, found with his throat slit in the basement kitchen of the Casa Cuba in Paris, September 1970. He had travelled to France on an official mission for Cuba and was planning to defect.

Oswaldo Dorticós, former President of the Republic (1959-1976) and sitting Minister of Justice. He was reported to have killed himself in 1983 after an argument with Commander Ramiro Valdés.

At least two were reported to have committed suicide in the aftermath of the Ochoa trial and purge --**Rafael Alvarez**, head of the Finance Department of the Ministry of the Interior, in August 1989, and **Enrique Cicard**, head of the Intelligence Department of MININT, who reportedly shot himself in the neck in September 1989 after having publicly criticized the firing squad execution of Tony De La Guardia.

Cuba Archive has at least 136 documented deaths classified as officially reported for lack of evidence to the contrary. Because most have been in prison or in detention at State Security facilities, cause of death is generally impossible to verify. Additional similarly reported cases have been tentatively classified as extrajudicial killings due to some evidence strongly pointing to that conclusion. Proof is generally evasive.

Call to Action

The Cuban regime has consistently demonstrated its disregard for the sanctity of life and universally held norms of conduct. That the international community has not held it accountable for even its more evident and egregious crimes has only emboldened it further. As long as it enjoys sustained impunity and is legitimized by celebrities and civilized states alike, it will continue to employ terror and violence to silence its detractors.

Most governments engage Cuba as if it were a respectable member of the community of nations. Yet, only states that uphold the rule of law and have an independent and reliable judicial system can guarantee lasting business opportunities, safety for visitors, and a reliable partnership. An unwavering stance rejecting the Cuban dictatorship's unacceptable behaviors is, in fact, in self-interest. However, it is also what is right and ethical.

The required global response to regimes such as Cuba's --by individuals, governments and institutions-- is to demand full and independent investigations of turbid cases such as those outlined above. If suspicions of state involvement prove well founded, Cuba should be held accountable at all levels --bilaterally, multilaterally, and at all appropriate international instances and bodies. The deaths of Laura Pollán last October and of Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero last week present a necessary and unavoidable opportunity to do so.

We call on urgent action by the international community to demand:

1. the safety and wellbeing of Angel Carrero and Aron Modig as well as procedural fairness for them;
2. access by the Payá family, trusted third parties, and the media to Carrero and Modig to hear their accounts at safe locations such as trusted embassies, free of any restrictions or pressure from Cuban authorities and with toxicology tests proving they have been given no drugs;
3. an autopsy of the body of Harold Cepero by a trusted pathology team in a trusted facility outside of Cuba;
4. comprehensive investigations of the deaths of Payá/Cepero and Pollán conducted by trustworthy independent international experts granted free and full access to all witnesses and material evidence.

"Man's defense against state violence must be absolute; silence is not justified as part of any strategy..."
 —Father Miguel Loredo, 1988, victim of a 1982 assassination attempt.

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