

## Second Trip Report

Period

July 11, 2008 – July 25, 2008

Asociația Pro Democrația

The second trip to Cuba took place from July 11 to July 25, 2008. The second trip proved to be a network establishing mission for APD and was focused on getting to know more details about Cuba, the activities of the Cuban independent civil society, the political situation etc.

Providing the data APD received from PIN, and the data APD gathered during the first humanitarian trip, the following visits took place during the second trip to Cuba:

**Bartolo Palomares Sanchez** is a Cuban dissident from the town of Cumanayagua, province Cienfuegos. The day before the visit of the project team (July 13), Bartolo Palomares Sanchez had been arrested in order to stop him from going to Havana. He had also been arrested on July 4, when his ID card was retained by the police. The card hadn't been returned to Bartolo Palomares Sanchez until July 14, and he traveled to Havana without it, risking his freedom. He said that during the July 13 interrogations the policemen had menaced him he would be arrested and trialed under Law 88. His home had been searched for several times, and he feared it was being searched during the present discussion.

He has recently been expelled from working as a welder for a private business. Mr. Sanchez was originally a baker, but he was interdicted to work as one, for fear he would poison the others. He said he was living in terrible economic conditions, his mother is living in extreme poverty, and he can not help her. To prove how poor he is, Mr. Sanchez showed his old shoes that he had to mend when preparing for the July 4 reception at the American Embassy.

Mr. Sanchez believes that the actual regime is doing everything to impede him and his family from fighting, but he is very convinced that nothing will stop him. He says nothing has changed under the regime of Raul Castro. When asked about the European Union to lift the sanctions on Cuba, Mr. Sanchez said he does not approve this decision. Mr. Sanchez believes that this gesture legitimizes the Cuban effort and sends the message that Raul's regime is bringing a change. Since there's actually no change, the sanctions shouldn't have been lifted. Mr. Sanchez is a member of the Colegio de Pedagogos Independientes de Cuba and of the Coalicion Juvenil Martiana (CJM).

In the Colegio de Pedagogos Independientes de Cuba in Cumanayagua there are nine active members working with Mr. Sanchez. In the CJM there are 14 young active members and around 27 children. He is working with children suffering from Down syndrome (around

10), trying to make them feel accepted and useful: they dance, go to the beach etc. He tries to teach the young people some basic political concepts they can understand.

Mr. Sanchez considers that his biggest success is that he had proved to his peers that he can be against the government, and still be alive. Since he returned from Las Tunas, where he had been forcefully moved, he is living illegally in his wife's house. The neighbors respect him, and some are following him. A proof of success is the „interest“ of the Security services. In Cumanayagua there had been no opposition before he arrived, and the pressure to eliminate him is stronger.

**Mario Enrique Mayo Hernández** is a released Cuban prisoner who, at the moment of the visit, was preparing to leave Cuba, selling all his valuable belongings to raise the 400 CUC necessary for the medical visit.

Mr. Mayo was by far the most critical of the Cubans visited during this trip. His critics were not only limited to the political situation, but were targeted at the Cuban opposition, from Cuba and abroad. While he commented on the actual regime by saying that it didn't bring any change to Cuba, Mr. Mayo said he wants to emigrate because he thought the opposition would never be able to overthrow the regime. He described an opposition divided by economic interests, battles for power and infiltrated by the Security Services. Mr. Mayo estimates that out of 10 opposition members seven were infiltrated, and that 99% of the members of the opposition were rotten.

He drew a map of the way money is transferred from the “plantados” (who receive it from the American government), who distribute just a little part of this money to those in Havana. From Havana, those responsible with the money distribution send even less to the countryside and keep some of the funds for their personal use. Other example was Mr. Miranda, who used the money to restore his house: “it's a strange thing to see a dissident repair his house”. Also, while referring to other known dissidents as Oswaldo Paya, Mr. Mayo questions their authenticity or their commitment to fighting the regime.

**Yuri Pérez Vázquez** is a young Cuban dissident from the town of Camaguey. Mr. Perez received the material on electoral systems, vote and civic participation that APD had prepared. He and Mr. Sanchez participated in a detailed discussion on electoral systems. Both Mr. Perez and Mr. Sanchez were very interested in the presentation and the discussion.

One of their many questions was about the kind of electoral system that would suit Cuba's context. Mr. Sanchez wanted to know the effects of different electoral systems when applied during the first free elections in Cuba. Mr. Perez asked for more presentations of this type and whether there would be youth NGOs in Romania interested in cooperating and training the young liberal Cubans.

Mr. Perez is a member of Coalición Juvenil Martiana and said the aim of his organization is to form new political elite to govern Cuba during the transition from a communist regime. In order to do that, Mr. Perez's organization is training young people to be politically educated once their time comes. Mr. Perez asked for trainings, for political materials, and for contacts with NGOs in Eastern Europe. He said young Cubans are scared of a change and they should be shown the benefits of transition in other countries. After the presentation of the material on electoral systems, Mr. Perez said that his organization is interested in how to win the elections when Cuba will be a free country. He sees it possible with the help of a think tank, or if the organization is included in European networks.

**Nelson Aguiar Ramírez** is a Cuban dissident who was imprisoned at the time of the visit. The project team spoke with his wife, **Dolia Leal**. Mrs. Leal said there were three acts of repudiation against her, the most important being after the Damas in Blanco won the Sakharov price, in 2005. Crowds gathered outside her house calling her outside to face them. Mrs. Leal showed pictures and talked about the last act of repudiation, on April 21, 2008, when Damas de Blanco went to Plaza de la Revolucion to protest. The government sent women-military personnel to force them to leave the place. Mrs. Leal was physically aggressed during the repudiation, had bruises, and could not work for some weeks.

Mrs. Leal has no income, is not allowed to work, her most important revenues are foreign aid. Since Mr. Ramirez was held in a hospital (until July 1), the "jaba" for the prisoner was less important than in other cases. Before Mr. Ramirez was transferred back to prison, he had the right to visits every 15 days. He is now in a high-security level prison, and he has the right to one visit every two months.

Dolia Leal is a founder of the Damas de Blanco and an active member of the organization. She is also an active member of her husband's party. She believes Mr. Ramirez has been transferred from the military hospital to an isolated cell due to her civic activity. She believes her activity is the reason her severely ill husband is still in prison. According to Mrs. Leal, the Security officers tried to blackmail her to stop her civic activity in exchange for her husband's

freedom. Mrs. Leal hosts in her house an independent library, named Eddy Chibas, and she needs books that speak about the communist fall in Eastern Europe, books by Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa. Mrs. Leal gets her books from foreign embassies.

**Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina** is a released prisoner from Havana. He was forcefully moved to Baracoa, in the Guantanamo province. Mr. Lobaina held a hunger strike in order to be moved back to Havana. Mr. Miranda reckoned that Mr. Lobaina was to come back to Havana during this trip second week. When going back to meet with Mr. Lobaina, on July 23, only his son could be found at the new address. Mr. Lobaina had held a five days hunger strike, at the end of which he negotiated with the authorities his return to Havana. At the time of this visit, he was still in Baracoa, recovering.

**Arturo Pérez de Alejo Rodríguez** is a Cuban dissident from the town of Manicaragua, imprisoned at the moment of the visit. The members of the project team spoke with his wife Moraima.

To go to Havana, Mrs. Moraima needs some months to prepare her visit. She first takes her city clothes to a relative's house, and in time transports all she needs for a long stay. She said the government tries every way possible to stop her from going to Havana, the best way being to plan her prison visits during, or short before anniversaries, or dissident activities. Mrs. Moraima said that she did not even try to go to the July 4 reception, or the July 13 (to close to come back for a prison visit) because the national police were stopping those who wanted to attend these events. Most of those who tried to go to Havana were stopped at road blocks on their way, and sent back home.

Mrs. Moraima has no income, she was a nurse before being expelled from work, and now she does only small favors to her neighbors (she was found measuring a woman's blood pressure). She lives in her parents' house and receives money from her daughter, living abroad. She also has a second daughter, 13 years old, living with her.

Her husband is detained in the prison of Santa Clara, the town of Villa Clara. Mr. Pérez de Alejo Rodríguez refused from the beginning to wear the inmate uniform, and was punished – 21 days of isolation. He never wore the uniform after. Mrs. Moraima is permitted to visit her husband once every 45 days, for a family visit, and once every 2 months for a marital visit.

**Rene Gomez Manzano** is a Cuban independent journalist. It proved to be a fortune to meet Mr. Gomez in first, as he painted a very clear general picture of the dissident's situation in Cuba, very pertinent comments about the political situation. Mr. Gomez considers that nothing has changed since Raul came to power, and nothing will, for a long time. This regime is the same as the one 50 years ago, without Fidel Castro. It is not in the interest of the leaders to bring changes for Cubans, to give them more freedom, because every change can be a crack in the totalitarian system.

**Yoani Sanchez/ Reinaldo Escobar** are a couple of young dissidents from Havana. Yoani Sanchez was nominated by Time magazine, this year, one of the most influent 100 people in the world. She lives with her husband Reinaldo, an independent journalist, who used to work until 1988 for Juventud Rebelde. They both work on the *desdecuba.com* project, a blog network. Yoanni's blog – Generacion Y - is extremely popular. She has about 8 millions visitors every month. The access from Cuba to her blog has been restricted in May, so she never sees the outcome; she sends the posts to her friends abroad, and they upload the photos, keep the site up to date. Yoani said her blog is so successful because she speaks in simple words, without using the same obsolete terms one could hear every day. Her blog is different because she belongs to a generation (she is 32) that chose not to speak, but to keep quiet or immigrate. Her blog is a fresh voice and an open space for her generation to say what they cannot in public.

The Government blocked the access to her site, which cannot be accessed from Cuba. Although the site cannot be seen by many people, the information she posts gets to millions of Cubans through thousands of private computers. Yoani sends the information from public Internet-cafes. In a couple of minutes she sends the information to her friends abroad, who update the blog hosted by a German server that the Cuban Government cannot censor. The blog content returns to Havana on CDs, and Yoani makes up to 100 copies per day to distribute.

Once they are distributed in Cuba, the CDs are multiplied very quickly. This way her posts are read by thousands of Cubans, not necessarily having access to Internet. For example, one single post of her had over 6.000 comments, and as a rule, one post may have over 1.000 comments. Yoani thinks that the question is not how many persons have access to the Internet, but how many people are informed due to the fact that one of them had access to the Internet. It usually takes one escaped person, and we have to take into account that the black Internet market is rapidly growing. Besides, the Government sabotages itself: the

public institutions employees that have access to the Internet sell the access passwords after working hours. Tens and hundreds of Cubans use them during night time through phone networks that have low prices. They download movies, music or information on memory sticks and give them to other Cubans. Yoani said that the Government knows the Cubans use black market Internet, as well as they use food black market in order to survive.

This was an extremely interesting experience, as Yoani is really a fresh voice, her discourse and way of living are easier to understand for a foreigner. Yoani and Reinaldo don't speak English, they speak German, and Yoani is learning French. What the couple needs most is money to finance Yoani's access to internet (as she accesses her e-mail from state internet booths). They also need bulk CDs (small ones), to distribute Yoani's blog content to those who don't have access to her blog (she had already distributed 100 CDs).

### **Damas de Blanco**

As the meeting with Mrs. Leal or Mrs. Alejandrina did not take place, the next trip was to the Santa Rita church, to see Damas de Blanco at the religious service. The discussions involved both Mrs. Alejandrina and Mrs. Leal, and 10 of the Damas in Blanco. As there were Security officers everywhere, and because all of the ladies were hoping they would host the next visit, a strict discretion had to be kept. The Ladies are closely watched by a young "student", who tapes every gesture. Mrs. Leal said this has been happening for more than three months, and the Ladies are mocking "the student" telling him the book he would deliver to the State Security about them is already 1.000 pages heavy.

Mrs. Leal described the activities of Damas de Blanco, who meet once a week, on Sunday and, once a month, in Laura Polan's (wife of Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez) house, to talk about the prisoners situation. They march every Sunday on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and their last protest was on May 21.