



2nd GENEVA SUMMIT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRACY

March 8-9, 2010

Session: Authoritarianism and Dissent: 21st Century Horizons

Speech of Mr. Jose Gabriel Ramon Castillo, Cuban Dissident and former Prisoner of Conscience

Thank you and good afternoon.

A few days ago Cuba was in press because of something that happened to a political prisoner, his name is Orlando Zapata Tamayo. All the world's major newspapers covered the story: Orlando Zapata had died after 83 days on hunger strike. This has moved the entire world, and all of us. He was fighting for our cause and he was one of us when we were put in prison in 2003, just a few days prior to his unfortunate decease. I was saying to some friends that this would happen. It wasn't something I was hoping for of course, but I could see events unfolding and I could see that the Castro regime was not coming to a decision in his case. He was simply asking for his rights as a prisoner to be respected, he wasn't asking for anything else, he just wanted to be properly treated as a prisoner and the government was denying him his rights as a prisoner.

Now this story has been heard all over the world and Orlando Zapata is just one of the dozens of Cuban political prisoners who are suffering under a despotic regime that flagrantly violates human rights. The Cuban government has now held power for 51 years and it does not allow for any decent whatsoever. Any opposition in Cuba, whether peaceful or otherwise, is put in prison. Many Cubans, over the last 51 years, have ended up in prison, simply for opposing the regime in a peaceful manner. I can give you a figure, over 50 percent of people born in Cuba since 1959 have been to prison at some point in Cuba and I think this really draws our attention to the kind of system that is in existence in Cuba.

Now, what we're not trying to do here is give you necessarily just information on what's going on in the country, I'm sure this goes on in our countries for example in Korea, Burma, Venezuela and so on. We've been invited here and we would like to thank UN Watch for inviting us here and also thank all the organizations that have organized this conference. And we are here really because it enables us to maintain contact with all of you who are here today; it enables you to know about our reality and enables you to help us as far as possible through your votes, your demonstrations, your support to prevent these things happening in our countries. Now, in Cuba there are various people who are on hunger strike. Orlando Zapata has died last week, but there has been a domino effect following his example. Other prisoners have now started hunger strikes, including a dissident whose picture I will try and show you here. He's an independent



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journalist and his name is Guillermo Fariñas Hernández. He has declared that he is now on hunger strike and he is aiming to achieve the freeing of other political prisoners in Cuba who suffer from chronic illnesses. Our friend here is on hunger strike also so that everyone on Cuba can have access to the Internet. Here's someone who have sacrificed himself over many years, he's been asking the Cuban government for changes in the regime so that we can have a different society in Cuba, and he has carried out his activities by sacrificing himself. It is very possible that this colleague will also pass away if the regime continues to maintain its position. It knows full well that it's not being asked for the world in its hands to comply with the request. There are over twenty people from our cause that suffer from chronic illnesses. There is one, Ariel Sigler Amaya, who we brought here prior to him to catching an illness that he did catch in prison, and he also has gone on hunger strike now.

So, I wanted to draw your attention to all these matters because each political prisoner in Cuba has a story behind them. We all went to prison for opposing the regime and so on, now I'm a teacher, I'm a journalist, myself. I write a magazine called Fueros Magazine and this was promoting culture in an independent manner, we weren't broadcasting the views of any political party or organization, I was simply a dissident. I was sent to prison and I was sentenced to twenty years. Now, I got ill in prison and it was thanks to the Spanish government actually that I came out of prison alive. I was deported to Spain; I came out of prison and was sent straight to Spain, and it's thanks to that that I'm alive and that I can be here today to speak to you. That's my story. That's my simple personal story, I can tell you it in the simple manner I have, but what I would say to you is that it interests me much more to talk about the people who are on hunger strike in Cuba. There are almost 300 political prisoners currently held in Cuba. I'd like to tell you about the situation of a country where there is no freedom, people have no future there, and these are things of great concern. There are messages emerging from Cuba: we hear that Cuba is a First World country, it has a wonderful education system, a wonderful health system, but unfortunately that's not the case. Cuba is a country in which the regime has condemned its people to live in abject misery. There are many people who are very well-informed and have been to Cuba and seen with their own eyes what is going on in my country and know full well what's going on, they know who's responsible for what's going on and who is complicit in the dictatorship's activities.

In Cuba there is a dissident movement; it has been growing exponentially. In 2003, the movement suffered a serious setback and many people went to prison in the Black Spring of 2003, but today there are two or three times as many dissidents as there were in 2003. These dissidents are struggling and demanding and acting in a peaceful manner to bring about change within Cuba. They are expecting our support. I would like the world to become more aware of



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the situation, and I would like the people who know what's going on to support those people who feel so alone and within Cuba, they believe they are not supported by the world. And I would like really really us to show that there is a certain solidarity with these dissidents. Just recently in Madrid, there was discussion on a statement by the Popular Party and I was saying that the most damaging thing for Cuba is for the outside world not to come up with a common position on the Castro government. Now, unfortunately the statement didn't emerge in Spain, but coming up with a statement would give the government the opportunity to say something specific. What we hear unfortunately is that foreign governments say that they support the Cuban regime and that's terrible for the people to hear. We need to ensure that the correct interpretation of events sees the light.

Now, I don't know how long I have left to speak. I have two minutes left apparently. Well, in my remaining two minutes I think can say a couple more things.

I would invite you to look at this newspaper, it came out last Thursday. It's called "Ciudadanos Cuba" (Cuba Citizens), it's on online, and here we publish all information related to Cuba. It's been translated into various languages: English, French, Polish, for example, and here you can find all kinds of information on Cuba. It's very current, up-to-date information and you can really see how many people are in prison, there is even a list of current prisoners. I wanted to conclude by showing you something else, and I think this is the most interesting thing that I can say. Now you can see a face on the screen. This is Doctor Darsi Ferrer Ramirez. He's a doctor, he's a dissident, he's been a prisoner since the 23 of July last year and his apparent crime is one of violence against the state, but what he does is survey matters within Cuba. Basically, he runs opinion polls and it's because of this that they sent him to prison, simply for running opinion polls in Cuba. So here you can see his face, you can see that he's been beaten. He was attacked by over ten policemen and really was very near death's door. He's in the Valle Grande Prison at the moment; it's a prison outside Havana and he's still waiting to go to trial. And like him, in the same situation, is another gentlemen, who was also attacked, José Diaz Silva. He's someone else who you can see here and you can see his injuries, you can see the injury on his body, which resulted from an attack, an unexplained attack. He was someone who simply ran a study on what was going on in Cuba and because of that he was arrested. This is day-to-day life in Cuba; the regime, the government simply won't tolerate dissidence. The message is that dissidents are mercenaries and this is the way the government tries to find support from other governments. Now of course no one within Cuba accepts this message because all Cubans know that there is an independent opposition within Cuba that is opposed to the current situation in the country.

I hope that these explanations will show you that my story is reflected here as well. I came out of



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prison ill, I spent over five years in prison, during which time I was subject to cruel and degrading treatment. I spent a great deal of time in a punishment cell incommunicado, and I think this really shows you the kinds of things that go on in Cuba. I continue to work for human rights and we continue to work on various projects such as the Ciudadano Cuba Project that I mentioned earlier, and this is how we work both within and outside Cuba in favor of democracy and respecting human rights.

Thank you very much.