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Americas Watch Report On Cuba

by John Neagle

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On Jan. 28, Americas Watch released a 137-page report on Cuba, four days before an annual UN meeting on human rights convenes in Geneva. According to the report, while Cuba has improved its prisons and permitted some dissident groups to form, it continues to commit "serious violations of human rights that victimize the whole Cuban population." The report, titled "Human Rights in Cuba: The Need to Sustain the Pressure," said that the most systematic violation of rights, is the monitoring of "almost every aspect" of private life. Neighborhood committees collect opinions, gossip and reports which determine who obtains day-care services, university enrollment, and job changes. For those arrested in Cuba, the report said, there is little hope of a rigorous defense or an impartial trial because, according to the Cuban Constitution, the courts are subordinate to other branches of Government and lawyers are instructed that the interests of the state are superior to those of their clients. Americas Watch pointed out that Cuba is the only country that imposes AIDS tests on all citizens and the only one that confines for life anyone carrying the AIDS virus. Thus far, 259 Cubans with the virus are being held in a guarded sanitarium on the outskirts of Havana. Cuba officials argue that the government's human rights record is better than that of many other countries since citizens are assured of at least basic shelter and food as well as free education and medical care. In the past two years, the government has released several hundred political prisoners, renovated some prisons and permitted visits by international human rights monitors. Several human rights groups have been established, and human rights workers regularly meet with journalists and other foreign visitors. However, said the report, recently the government has begun "to crack down on its critics," and perhaps a dozen human rights workers have been arrested. At the Geneva conference, a UN team that visited Cuba in September and received 1,700 complaints of rights abuses, is to deliver a report. The UN team's visit was arranged, in large part, because of a US campaign charging that as recently as 1986, 15,000 political prisoners were being held in Cuban jails and that prisoners were being tortured and sometimes executed. The UN team found nothing of that magnitude. Diplomats in Geneva say the team was told Cuba had 121 long-term political prisoners and that it found little evidence of torture or inhumane prison conditions. Some human rights workers in Cuba say there are as many as 1,000 political prisoners, including 225 that Castro has agreed to release. The discrepancy between the US charges and the UN team's findings, said Americas Watch, should not be construed as a justification to end scrutiny of Cuba. (Basic data from New York Times, 01/29/89)

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