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Human Rights Activists In Havana Ask Soviet Union To Urge Castro To Practice Perestroika

by John Neagle

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On April 4, several human rights activists were arrested before dawn at their homes. They had planned to stage a demonstration in front of the Soviet Embassy. Prior to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's arrival in Havana, a coalition of rights groups delivered a message to the Soviet Embassy praising Gorbachev for reducing human rights violations in the USSR, and urging him to appeal to President Fidel Castro to follow suit. Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Commission on Human Rights, told reporters on the morning of April 4 that there had been no response to the message. He said seven to 12 persons had been arrested. Shortly before the Gorbachev visit, Castro permitted two Cubans who had spent more than eight years in asylum in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana to emigrate to Peru. The two men were part of a group that broke into the Embassy in 1980 in an attempt to flee Cuba. Their action reportedly triggered the Mariel boatlift in which more than 125,000 Cubans eventually arrived on the Florida coast aboard a flotilla of small craft. Leaders of an organization called the Pro-Human Rights Party had been unable to obtain government permission for the demonstration, but were planning to go ahead with the event anyway. Government officials confirmed the arrest of Party president Samuel Martinez Lara, a 37-year-old medical doctor who did postgraduate work at the University of California at Berkeley. The official said Martinez was charged with engaging in "unauthorized activities." One of the pressure group's main objectives is a plebiscite on Castro's rule. (Basic data from AP, 04/01/89; New York Times, 04/05/89)

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