

3-12-1998

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuba Releases 299 Prisoners in Response to Papal Request." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8395>

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Cuba Releases 299 Prisoners in Response to Papal Request

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 1998-03-12

The Cuban government released 299 prisoners in February, in response to requests by Pope John Paul II during his January visit to Cuba (see NotiCen, 01/29/98). The action elicited a low-key response from the US government, while Cuban exile leaders renewed their denunciations of human rights abuses in Cuba. The US State Department estimated that 600 political prisoners were in Cuban jails before the release.

The Cuban government maintains it has no political prisoners but rather criminals who have violated laws against counterrevolutionary acts. Seven prisoners, members of the human rights organization Derechos del Hombre, were released in early February. Their release was not related to the pope's request, but resulted from negotiations between the group and the government dating back to October 1997. On Feb. 12, the Foreign Ministry announced that 299 prisoners would be released in response to the pope's request that the government free "prisoners of conscience." This group included 74 prisoners on a list drawn up by the Vatican and given to President Fidel Castro during the pope's visit.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alejandro Gonzalez said 106 prisoners on the Vatican's list had been released before the pope's arrival, and the release of 20 others was under consideration. Another 224, not on the list, were also released. Some had been convicted of common crimes, and others were released on "humanitarian grounds" of age, health, or other "special circumstances."

Seventy prisoners on the Vatican's list were not released. Cuban authorities explained that they had committed serious counterrevolutionary offenses. This group included "terrorists" backed by the US, said the official newspaper Granma. Specifically excluded was Salvadoran citizen Raul Ernesto Cruz, charged with a series of terrorist bombings in 1997 that killed a Canadian national (see NotiCen, 10/02/97). The Granma account concluded with the warning that "the revolution is generous but at the same time knows how to be firm. There can be no impunity for enemies of the nation or for those who want to destroy Cuba."

Vatican "delighted," but US response is lukewarm

The Vatican said it was "delighted" with the step, adding, "We see it as a strong and eloquent statement to those who want to see a better future in their relationship with Cuba." Apparently believing the first group of seven was all who would be released, the State Department called it "woefully inadequate."

When that release was followed a few days later by the release of the additional 299, the State Department said it was too soon to decide whether the action merited a response from the US. Shortly after the release was announced, anti-Castro congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) said she would testify before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that Cubans had been harassed and beaten during the January papal visit.

Simultaneously, anti-Castro Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) criticized Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Cesar Gaviria for doing too little about human rights abuses in Cuba and called for his resignation. Gaviria favors Cuba's reinstatement as a member of the OAS and commended the Cuban government on the prisoner release. [Sources: Reuter, 02/12/98; CNN, 02/13/98, Granma (Cuba), 02/13/98; The New York Times, 02/13/98, 02/15/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/10/98, 02/11/98, 02/20/98; Granma Internacional (Cuba), 02/24/98]

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