

PRISONERS OF COLOR*

ISLAS WILL DEDICATE A PAGE IN EACH ISSUE TO THE AFRO-CUBANS' SERVING TIME IN CUBA'S PENAL SYSTEM

In many countries people are detained for trying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, association, assembly, or movement. Some are imprisoned because they or their families are involved in political or religious activities. Some are arrested because of their connection with political parties or national movements that oppose government policies. Trade union activity or participation in strikes or demonstrations are common causes for imprisonment. Often, people are imprisoned because they questioned their government or tried to publicize human rights violations in their own countries. Some are jailed on the pretext that they committed a crime, but it is in fact because they criticized the government. People who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, color, or language and who have not used or advocated violence are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

Brief Biography of

Oscar Elías Biscet

Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet is a 43 year-old Afro-Cuban physician and renowned pacifist, who is a spiritual man and follower of the philosophies of Thoreau, Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose motto is “life and freedom”. This human rights activist was sentenced to three years in prison on February 26, 1999 for the crime of flying the Cuban flag upside down (an internationally recognized symbol of distress) as a way of protesting the human rights abuses in Cuba. He was released from prison on October 31, 2002.

Barely a month after his release, Dr. Biscet was arrested again for supporting human rights. He peacefully staged a hunger strike in his home and is now serving a 25-year sentence. He is a principal of the Varela Project, an initiative to secure basic human rights for the Cuban people.

Reliable information on Dr. Biscet's status is difficult to obtain. The details that emerge about him come primarily from his wife, other prisoners, and his brief powerful letters smuggled from prison, the combination of which evoke strong emotion similar to Dr. Martin Luther King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”. The details include descriptions of appalling degradation and brutality.

Dr. Biscet is rarely allowed to have visits from his wife, sometimes only twice in a ten-month period. His physical condition is in dangerous decline. He is rail thin, has lost an estimated 40 pounds. He suffers from severe hypertension. In addition to being malnourished, he has lost several teeth during his latest confinement.

Dr. Biscet's prison cell is the stuff of a Victor Hugo nightmare: tiny, filthy, and

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shared with an almost uncontrollably violent cellmate. He has no windows and has not seen sunlight in weeks. He is afforded no medicines or toiletries. Other than the visits from his wife, he is permitted no visitors, correspondence, or other reading materials. Nonetheless, he inspires others with his repeated acts of defiance against his persecutors.

Here is a mock Cuban prison cell used to imprison political dissidents. The cell, based on a description provided by jailed dissident Oscar Elias Biscet that was smuggled out of prison, was on display at the Havana residence of the chief U.S. diplomat in Cuba.

The probability that Dr. Biscet will survive his sentence is not great. He has but two avenues of hope. The first is liberation after Castro's death, although there is no guarantee Cuba will turn into a democratic republic immediately upon Castro's death. The second is perhaps even more farfetched, that wide-

spread publicity of Dr. Biscet's plight and that of other political prisoners will shame the Cuban government into releasing him. This government is not known for yielding to this kind of pressure, although it is conceivable that after a period of protest Dr. Biscet could be released without a big deal.

The unfortunate reality is that Dr. Biscet will never receive the kind of coverage that would cause his jailers even the slightest discomfort. The media outlets with the capacity to generate the requisite publicity seem more intent on focusing on the United State's political administration towards the Cuban regime. And, human-rights activists seem more occupied with the plight of enemy combatants in comparison with a humble but charismatic doctor who has professed nothing but admiration for American democracy.

The odds are that a true champion for liberty will spend his remaining days wasting away in unspeakable privation and pain.