

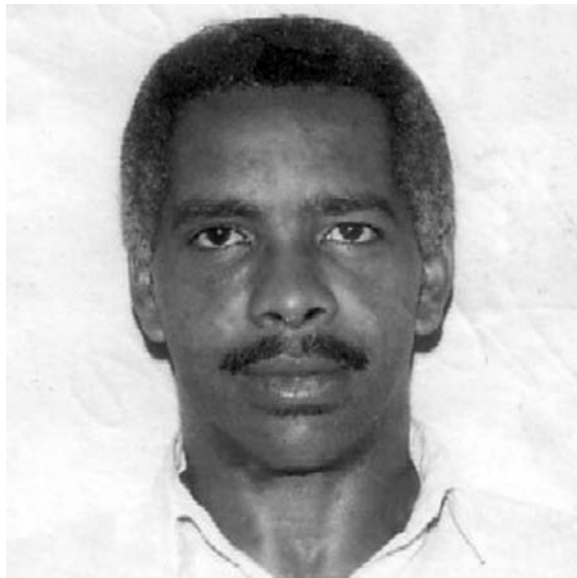
PRISONERS OF COLOR

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.

Miguel Valdés Tamayo: first victim of the Group of 75

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On January 10, 2007, Miguel Valdés Tamayo, founder and vice president of the civic organiza-

tion Hermanos Fraternal por la Dignidad [Brotherhood for Dignity], died of a heart attack. He was 50 years

old. In 2003, Valdés Tamayo was the first from the Group of 75, members of the peaceful opposition and independent journalists condemned in 2003, to die. He had been given a fifteen-year sentence and sent to the Kilo 8 prison in Camagüey, about 330 miles (533 Km.) east of Havana.

On June 9, 2004, Valdés Tamayo was released due to health problems. “So that he wouldn’t die on them [the Cuban government],” quipped Elizardo Sánchez Santacruz, leader of the Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation (Comisión Cubana para los Derechos Humanos y la Reconciliación Nacional), he had to be hospitalized four times during his 14 months of imprisonment.

Before ending up in prison, this television repairman from the Párraga neighborhood (one of the poorest of Havana), Valdés Tamayo had already had two previous myocardial heart failures. The poor medical attention he received in the penitentiary is described in this letter to his wife, Bárbara Elisa Collazo Portillo, who had the right to one conjugal visit only every five months (for three hours) and another one, every two months (for two hours) in the company of another relative:

“They have not delivered the medicines you sent to me. They don’t check my blood pressure. We live eight inmates to an 18 by 9 foot (6 x 3 meter) cubicle right next to a toilet and sink. I was only permitted one visit by a chaplain. There is only one telephone available for 600 inmates. I

am allowed only a one hour walk in the patio each day. The daily meal consists of boiled corn meal, a puree concocted with unidentifiable ingredients, bland broths, watery slop containing a few beans and, when higher ups visit the prison, we get a meager ration of meat.”



The prison abuse of Valdés Tamayo became acute at the beginning of 2004, when the conditions within the Kilo 8 prison were disclosed:

“Routine discipline is very severe. In the maximum-security areas, the inmates live in total solitary confinement. Sunlight (that is to say, sunlight hours) can be had only in tiny, four by four cells with no external visual stimulation and only a roof opening. Prisoners being moved from one part of the prison grounds to any another (for visits, the pavillion, the infirmary), are cuffed with their hands behind their back and taken by the arm by one or two guards. Breakfast, lunch, dinner or medicines are administered through an opening

in the lower part of each cell. During this initial phase inmates are constantly abused (many have suffered arm, head and leg fractures). Inmates are also verbally abused. There is no radio or television and the newspaper is almost never delivered. Letters anywhere take from two weeks to two months and some disappear altogether (whether sent by our relatives to us or vice-versa). The telephone is always out of order, thus precluding any kind of telephone communication. Basically, during this phase the inmate is held in almost total isolation and hardly has any rights. For those of us from the Group of 75, the first phase of special treatment was even more severe than the kind that is reserved for those condemned to death or life in prison.”

After being freed from prison, the government’s repressive assault on Valdés Tamayo, who barely survived continuous “acts of repudiation,” brief detentions and other sharp forms of intimidation, continued. The pro-government mobs would convene at his home to hurl insults such as “worm” and “United States mercenary” at him. Meanwhile, the police would routinely detain him for brief periods. In October of last year, for example, he was stopped six times and relieved, on each occasion, of his personal documents and money, according to charges by the Assembly for the Promotion of Civil Society [Asamblea para la Promoción de la Sociedad Civil –APSC].

Trying to avoid some of the acts of repudiation, Valdés Tamayo moved to

another part of the same Párraga neighborhood. By the same token, he received umpteen travel visas from the Embassy of the Netherlands and from the United States Interest Section, so he could leave the country and receive better medical attention for his serious heart condition. His entire family, except for his wife, already lived in exile. Nonetheless, the Cuban authorities refused to give him an exit permit, and Valdés Tamayo, despite his only treatment –25 pills a day–, expired in an intensive care room at the Julio Trigo Hospital in Havana.

In addition to his relatives, more than thirty members of the peaceful opposition and a number of European diplomats attended his funeral. Following religious services, the mortal remains of Valdés Tamayo were buried in the Colón Cemetery. Miriam Leiva, of the Ladies in White movement [movimiento Damas de Blanco], stated that the death of Valdés Tamayo “is a warning signal” because those who are still unjustly imprisoned could die as a result of the terrible conditions they endure and the lack of adequate medical attention.

In one of his missives, Valdés Tamayo left us the following declaration of his principles: “*My path is straight, firm, until the Cuban people are liberated.*”