

PRISONERS OF COLOR

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.

Marcelo Cano Rodríguez

Juan del Pilar Goberna
Human Rights Observer
Havana, Cuba

Prisoner of conscience Dr. Marcelo Cano Rodríguez was born on January 21st, 1965, in Havana. His humble and hard-working family very much supported the Revolutionary process of 1959. He spent his childhood, adolescence, and youth growing up within the framework of a socialist society. He was able to join the Communist Youth because he was a good student and behaved properly.

He began his medical studies at the Universidad de Oriente (in Santiago de Cuba); in his fourth year he transferred to the University of Havana, where he completed his degree. His work as a doctor began in the Ciénaga de Zapata (Ciénaga Swamp, in Matanzas), but his ideas and way of expressing himself created ideological and political

problems for him with the area's central administration. That got him relocated to work as a surgeon at the Hospital de Freire de Andrade (in Emergency Medicine).

Cano Rodríguez, motivated by the country's socioeconomic and political reality, and his personal experience with its disastrous public health situation, decided to create the Independent Medical College of Cuba, to link up any and all pre-existing institutions of this kind in numerous provinces. He was thrown out of medicine.

It could be said that Cano Rodríguez is slightly linked to the peaceful opposition; he is morally committed to human rights activism, and carries out a variety of tasks like monitoring prisoner access to medical attention, emotionally supporting their fam-



Marcelo Cano Rodríguez

ilies, seeking out and sending medicine to prisoners, denouncing the arbitrariness and negligence of the public health sector, etc. This is how he became an itinerant observer for the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN).

Cano Rodríguez intensified his humanitarian and contestatory work in an attempt to show international public opinion the reality faced by political prisoners in Cuba (particularly), as well as in the general Cuban prison population. For example, there are issues related to the limited or non-existing

medical or stomatological services, and the distribution of medicines.

The Cuban government did not tolerate Cano Rodríguez's noble and peaceful work: it rushed to identify him as an enemy of the state and U.S. paid mercenary. He was arrested on March 20th, 2003, in the midst of a repressive wave known as the Black Spring, during which more than 75 peaceful dissenters and independent journalists were imprisoned.

Cano Rodríguez was condemned to 18 years of prison, charged with Acts against the Independence and Territorial Integrity of the State, and violations of the "Gag Law." During the past six years of unjust incarceration, he has been moved from jail cells at State Security's general prison (Villa Marista) to higher security prisons in Canaleta (Ciego de Ávila) and Ariza (Cienfuegos), where the harsh conditions of internment and mistreatment have destroyed his health. His digestive, osteoporotic, and hypertensive problems are acute.

Amnesty International has declared Cano Rodríguez a prisoner of conscience; in addition, he is one of five doctors who are serving long prison terms in reprisal for their commitment to democracy and human rights. He is one of those admirable examples of valor and firmness in the Cuban prison system that continues to defy the totalitarian intolerance of the Castro government, despite the difficult conditions.