

Cuban dissident group hopes Obama can help free island's political prisoners

An activist support group for the wives of Cuban political prisoners has written to Sen. Barack Obama, expressing hope his policies toward the communist-run island may help free their loved ones if he wins the U.S. presidential race.

The Ladies In White, who consist of wives and other female relatives of 75 dissidents and independent journalists who were rounded up during the 2003 governmental crackdown on political dissent, sent an open letter to the Democratic candidate during his visit to Miami on Friday.

The Cuban government does not tolerate organized opposition and considers political opposition leaders "mercenaries" who take money from U.S. officials to undermine Cuban communism. In the five years since the arrests, authorities have freed 16 of the inmates on medical parole and released four others into forced exile in Spain.

"We have great hope that you can contribute to the immediate, unconditional liberation of the 55 who are still in horrible prison conditions, with serious health problems," the group wrote to Obama.

One of the founders of the Ladies in White, Miriam Leiva, said Sunday that representatives of the group living outside Cuba traveled to Miami to deliver the letter, and spoke with Obama for a few minutes.

"This has nothing to do with the presidential race or support for one candidate or another," she said. "We are not political. The only thing we hope for is the liberation of our prisoners and improved well-being for the Cuban people."

But Leiva and her husband, economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, also drafted a separate letter to Obama in which they applauded his pledge to meet with President Raul Castro and ease restrictions on Cuban Americans who want to travel or send money to the island.

The letter said an Obama win during the presidential election in November could "begin an era of political realism toward Cuba due to increased contact in all areas and with all representatives of society, including governments and leaders."

Espinosa Chepe was among those imprisoned in 2003, but was later released on medical parole.

Leiva said she supports doing away with Washington's nearly 50-year-old trade embargo because Havana uses it as an excuse for all the country's problems.

Obama says he would maintain the embargo to use as leverage for winning democratic change in Cuba. But he said he would allow "unlimited family travel and remittances to the island" and repeated that, if elected, he would be willing to meet with Raul Castro, who in February became Cuba's first new president in 49 years.

Source: AP

Amnesty International published Annual Report 2007

According to the AI Annual Report for 2007, restrictions on freedom of expression, association and movement remain severe on the island. At least 62 prisoners of conscience remained imprisoned and political dissidents, independent journalists and human rights activists continued to be harassed, intimidated and detained. However, four prisoners of conscience and other political dissidents were released and the government decided to discuss its human rights record with other governments and to ratify human rights treaties. Cubans continued to feel the negative impact of the US embargo.

In May, the Cuban government accepted the creation of a Bilateral Consultation Mechanism with the Spanish authorities, which included a formal Human Rights Dialogue. The decision followed a visit by the Spanish Foreign Minister, the first EU foreign minister to visit Havana since the crackdown on dissidents in 2003. This represented the resumption of inter-governmental co-operation, suspended in 2003.

Political relations with the USA remained tense. In October President Bush said the USA would maintain its policy of isolating Havana and called for international support.

In November, for the 16th consecutive year, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling on the USA to end its embargo on Cuba.

During 2007, the government refused to renew the visas of a number of foreign correspondents because "their approach to the Cuban situation is not one which the Cuban government finds appropriate."

Source: Amnesty International