

HRW: Halt Repression Now

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From [Human Rights Watch](#) :

Cuba: Halt Repression in Advance of Pope's Visit

Archdiocese Should Condemn Abuse of Protesters Expelled from Church

The Cuban government should immediately halt repression aimed at silencing dissent before and during [Pope Benedict XVI](#) 's visit to Cuba, Human Rights Watch said.

Dissidents in Havana, Holguín, Guantanamo, Matanzas, Palma Soriano, Pinar del Río, Sancti Spíritus, and Santiago de Cuba described to Human Rights Watch the repressive tactics currently being used by the Cuban government. They said that when they sought to exercise their basic rights to speak up about human rights concerns and hold rallies over the past few weeks, the authorities responded with beatings, detentions, harassment, and other repressive measures. [Pope Benedict XVI](#) is scheduled to be in Cuba from March 26 to March 28, 2012, to visit Havana and Santiago de Cuba.

"The arrests, beatings, and threats against dissidents in the lead up to the pope's visit suggest the Cuban government will do everything in its power to quash any dissent while the world's attention is on the island," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. "These repressive acts underscore just how little space there is in Cuba for any view that doesn't align with the Castro government."

State security officers arrested and beat 13 dissidents who were expelled from a Catholic church in Havana, where they had sought refuge while promoting demands to respect human rights in Cuba. Church officials asked government authorities to remove the dissidents, who told Human Rights Watch police threatened them with long prison sentences.

More than 80 women from the Damas de Blanco ([Ladies in White](#)), a human rights group consisting of wives, mothers, and daughters of political prisoners, were detained when they attempted to march on the anniversary of the Black Spring. During that crackdown, in March 2003, the government sentenced more than 75 independent journalists, human rights defenders, trade unionists, and other dissidents to jail for an average of 19 years under draconian laws for exercising their fundamental rights.

One of the damas described being held with 21 other women for more than four hours in a cell that was so tightly packed that all of the women had to remain standing. They had been detained for participating in a peaceful march, and were beaten by uniformed [police officers](#)

and civilians in plainclothes before being taken to the police station, she said.

Dissidents in Cuba told Human Rights Watch that government repression, surveillance, and threats have increased in the run up to the pope's visit. Several of those interviewed told Human Rights Watch they had been denied permission to travel outside of the cities where they lived, as well as warned explicitly that they would be punished severely if they tried to carry out any "counterrevolutionary" activities during the pope's visit.

Among the episodes described to Human Rights Watch:

- Caridad Caballero Batista, 39, a Dama de Blanco from Holguín, told Human Rights Watch she had been detained on March 16 with her son, Erik Esteban Sánchez Caballero, 19, and her husband, Esteban Sánchez Suarez, when they attempted to travel to Havana to participate in marches commemorating the Black Spring. She said she was held in solitary confinement in a small, unsanitary cell without windows for three days. Her husband was imprisoned in a cell with common criminals, she said. He refused to stand up and salute guards as they walked by, as a result of which he was thrown to the ground and beaten.

- Leticia Ramos, 42, a Dama de Blanco from Matanzas, told Human Rights Watch she had been arbitrarily detained three times in the last two weeks and warned that if she attempted to travel to Havana for the pope's visit, she would be arrested. After a severe beating at the hands of police on March 18, she was taken to a hospital, where a doctor told her that she had a broken rib, which is causing her a great deal of pain, she told Human Rights Watch.

- Rogelio Tavío Ramírez, 22, from Guantanamo, told Human Rights Watch that his father, Rogelio Tavío López, 48, had been detained since March 2. Both are members of the dissident group the Movement of Resistance and Democracy (Movimiento de Resistencia y Democracia). Tavío Ramirez said his father was charged with public disorder and "actions against the norm in the development of a minor" (acciones contra el normal desarrollo del menor) – a crime in Cuba's Criminal Code that punishes parents and guardians for failing in "their responsibilities related to the respect and love of the homeland" – charges his son said were motivated by his political activities. Rogelio Tavío López has been on hunger strike since he was detained, his son said, to protest what he views as his unjust prosecution and the fabricated charges against him.

- Obel Luís Ramos Acosta, 28, who founded a dissident group in Santiago, Cuba, told Human Rights Watch he was recently detained for handing out copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and an independent – and therefore illegal – publication called the "Voice of the East" (La Voz de Oriente). He said he was held incommunicado and without charge for three days at a police station, where he was beaten and ordered amid threats to abandon his activities.

On March 13, the 13 dissidents occupied the Basílica Menor de La Caridad – a Roman Catholic church in Havana. They told Human Rights Watch they had gone to the church

hoping it would provide a refuge from which to issue a call for fundamental rights. Their call, which included demands of respect for freedom of speech, assembly, and access to information, would have led to their arrest and punishment if made in public, they said.

In a news release issued on March 14, a representative of the Archdiocese of Havana said that, "No one has the right to convert churches into political trenches," and called the dissidents' action "illegitimate and irresponsible." The archdiocese issued another news release on March 15 saying Cardinal Jaime Ortega had "appealed to the corresponding authorities to invite the occupants to abandon the church."

According to the archdiocese's news release, the dissidents left the church voluntarily when government authorities arrived. The archdiocese also said the Cuban government had assured church officials that the dissidents would be transferred to a police station and then to their homes, and that they would not be punished.

However, four dissidents in the group told Human Rights Watch that dozens of [police officers](#) beat the activists inside the church, forcibly ejected them, and transported them to a police station. There, they were forcibly strip-searched in front of police officers, which they found humiliating and degrading.

The dissidents said they were then shown a case file that featured their names and outlined charges against them, which authorities told them could be used to prosecute them under the Law for the Protection of Cuban National Independence and the Economy. That law punishes any action deemed to support, facilitate, or advance the objective of the US embargo on Cuba. Police warned the dissidents they could be prosecuted after the pope leaves.

The dissidents were returned to their homes on the morning of March 16. They told Human Rights Watch that they have suffered persistent harassment by authorities ever since. Several of their family members have been beaten or threatened, they said. And on March 20, when the 13 dissidents were meeting in a home they use for gatherings, a police chief arrived and told them they would be arrested again if they did not immediately return to their individual homes. They said church officials have made no effort to contact them since they were expelled from the church and detained.

"When dissidents went to the church to seek sanctuary and express their views, church officials turned them over to the very government authorities from whom they were seeking refuge," Vivanco said. "The least church authorities can do now is to condemn the entirely predictable abusive response by the police, and call on the government to end its harassment of these and other peaceful dissidents."