



cuba-europa dialogues

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journalists against all odds

All official journalism that there is in Cuba stems from the State and is subject to censorship that filters all information given to the Cubans, providing them only with inadequate, incomplete facts interpreted beforehand. In addition to it, due to the almost total lack of internet access, Cubans cannot compare the information presented to them with the news brought by foreign press.

However, there is an ever-growing group of men and women working every single day on creating a different kind of journalism with the aim to spread the truth about the everyday reality surrounding them both within the island and abroad.

In our newsletter we have gathered stories of the lives of 10 of them, which have been written by their own colleagues. Some of these journalists, for example Yoani Sánchez, need no introduction. Others, however, are little known even to members of the community that each month eagerly awaits this modest newsletter. However, they all work towards a common goal, which is to break the silence and wake Cuba up from its information sleep, in which it has been submerged for too many years.

The difficulties they face when exercising their profession are numerous: Many of them lack proper education either because they had no access to it or because they were expelled from the university. Also, their old computers and cameras are regularly confiscated by State agents who hardly ever let them connect to the extremely slow internet or hide their printers under the bed. However, with their courage and imagination they have been able to do journalism on an ever-increasingly professional level.



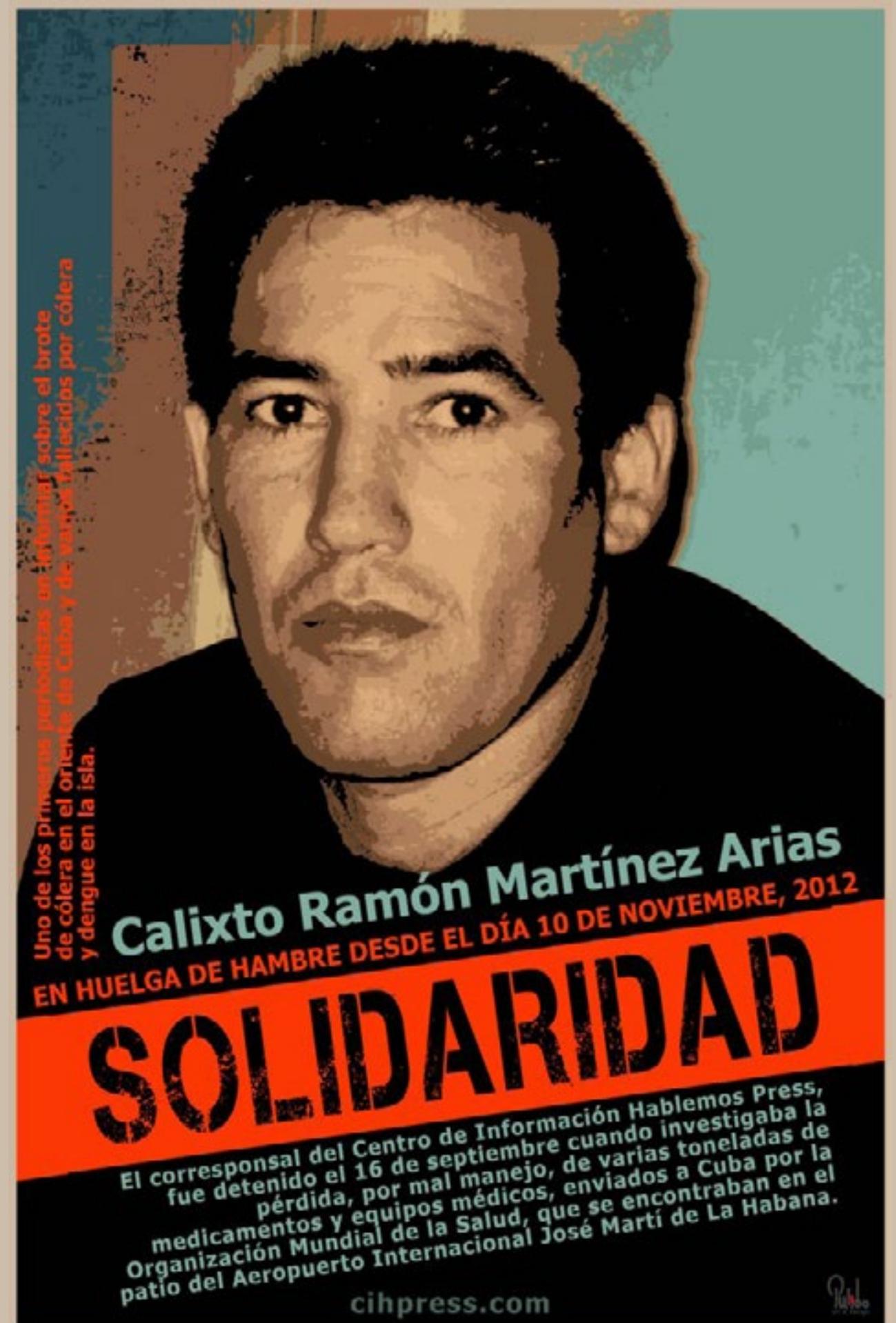
Yet, as Dickens said, the worst of times can also be the best of times and perhaps these journalists, distanced from the government's ideology and independent of any publishing house or editorial policy, are actually doing the freest journalism that they ever could and would. After all, their pens are not only informing us about what is happening in Cuba, they are also rewriting, word for word, the History of the Island.

Calixto Ramón Martínez Arias - Political Prisoner

Correspondent of Hablemos Press press agency in Havana. One of the first journalists who informed about the cholera outbreak in the Eastern part of the island.

Has started a hunger strike on 10th of November 2012

Calixto was arrested on the 16th of September 2012 as he was in the middle of investigation related to the mismanagement of medicine delivery sent to Cuba by World Health Organization (WHO). According to Calixto various tons of medicine were getting dumped near the Jose Marti international airport in Havana.





orlando luis pardo lazo

orlando luis pardo lazo half a poet, half a fool

yoani sánchez →

Half a poet, half a fool. That's what a great deal of passersby would say at seeing Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo with a camera in his hand, dark clothes and a head of long uncombed hair. Moreover, if they came a little bit closer, they would surely see him carrying a kitten – one of the many that he collects in the streets and takes care of until they become beautiful purring pets. After reading this description, you will probably picture a being walking the fine line between insanity and reality, between kindness and passion for books. Yet, behind this image of a modern “Gentleman from Paris¹”, OLPL (as his friends have nicknamed him) is an exceptional, rare person, which Cuba at the beginning of the third millennium simply doesn't deserve.

His uniqueness stems from his creative ability to combine the everyday with the transcendent. Moreover, he has a prodigious skill to dissect the language to make a thousand and one puns. Orlando Luis is a writer from intestines to skin, from eyebrows to ankles. His whole world view is based on a metaphor, fantasies built on descriptions of a Cuba that his generation was told could one day exist but that would materialize. Thus, fiction was an inseparable part of his childhood: political speeches broadcast on TV, failed agricultural plans, a war that was declared but never fought. A child born in Lawton, highly sensitive to what was happening around him, couldn't simply opt for anything else than writing. Amidst a reality of disillusion, OLPL created his own delirious and lucid world of texts. Since telling stories about a socially and politically dysfunctional island didn't quite fulfil him, he began to immortalize the reality around him in pictures. A CLICK of the shutter and there it was:

¹ El Caballero de París in Spanish. A statue raised in the middle of Havana to commemorate a well known street person of the 1950's.

an old lady, frustrated by the extremely low pension, walking along a long queue for food. Another CLICK: a smile of a student, who is sure to leave the country in a few years. A beautiful picture. One of the many that “our Lawton fool” makes. CLICK. The closure of the shutter captured the mediocrity of political billboards whose colours are gradually fading. CLICK. A prostitute selling her body to tourists while passing by below a Cuban flag. One more CLICK. The entire Havana entered the camera through the lens while passing through the eyes of this exceptional poet, the saddest eyes I know.

In a country which only accepts uniformity, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo is a rare figure. That’s why he has had a great deal of problems with the dictators of thought. He has suffered arrests, illegal abductions, beatings, confiscation and has been subjected to threats and surveillance. He has received a large dose of terror which was supposed to dissuade him from adding new contributions to his blog and posting tweets about what is happening behind the curtain of normality. His writing has become sharper and his puns more poignant and this has made the government increasingly uncomfortable because it doesn’t have a sense for play on words. However, what bothers the totalitarian regime is that OLPL is much more than a prominent writer and a keen photographer. He is an amazing man, a great human being ready to help, give shelter and love his neighbours in a way that he couldn’t learn from instructors of the Young Pioneer organization. If you ever meet him, you will probably see him lovingly carrying a newborn kitten in his hands, or taking care of one of his persecuted friends. ←



roberto guerra

roberto guerra

the miracle of hablemos press

Roberto lives in a small apartment on the border of the municipalities of El Cerro and Centro Habana. Although there isn't much space – only just enough to accommodate his bulky body, the living room is always crowded with people. Friends, supporters and pro-democracy activists coming from all provinces of the island, independent Cuban journalists and international press reporters, photographers, free artists, loyal neighbors and, of course, multitude of people coming to complain about acts of injustice or denounce violation of their fundamental rights. That's the everyday reality at the headquarters of the *Hablemos Press* Information Centre and that's also how the life goes on in the apartment where Roberto Guerra lives with his family.

Roberto Guerra is a peasant from eastern Cuba, which is both the poorest and the most violent part of the country (also, it is thought to be the region with the most radical revolutionary fundamentalism). Roberto has grown up in the Sierra Maestra, the mountain range to which young Fidel Castro fled and where he started the guerrilla war that brought him to power on January 1, 1959. Due to that, Roberto could experience the harshness of the rural life in the mountains many decades after the triumph of the Revolution. He shared local political prejudices and almost feudal taboos and could have easily turned to yet another supporter of the repressive socialist regime like many of those who had lost hope of a livable life, stuck between family troubles and evil closure of the country's boundaries. Fortunately, he has not.

Roberto Guerra left the East for the capital of the island, where he quickly became an active advocate of personal freedoms of citizens and respect for human rights in Cuba. His abundant public activities include participation in a famous protest,

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo →

which took place right in the middle of the Plaza of the Revolución square (i.e., in the very heart of the totalitarian power) in 2005. This was far too much for the government's military elite, who detained and prosecuted him. He was sentenced in court without a proper defense. It may have looked like an end, but it was just a beginning.

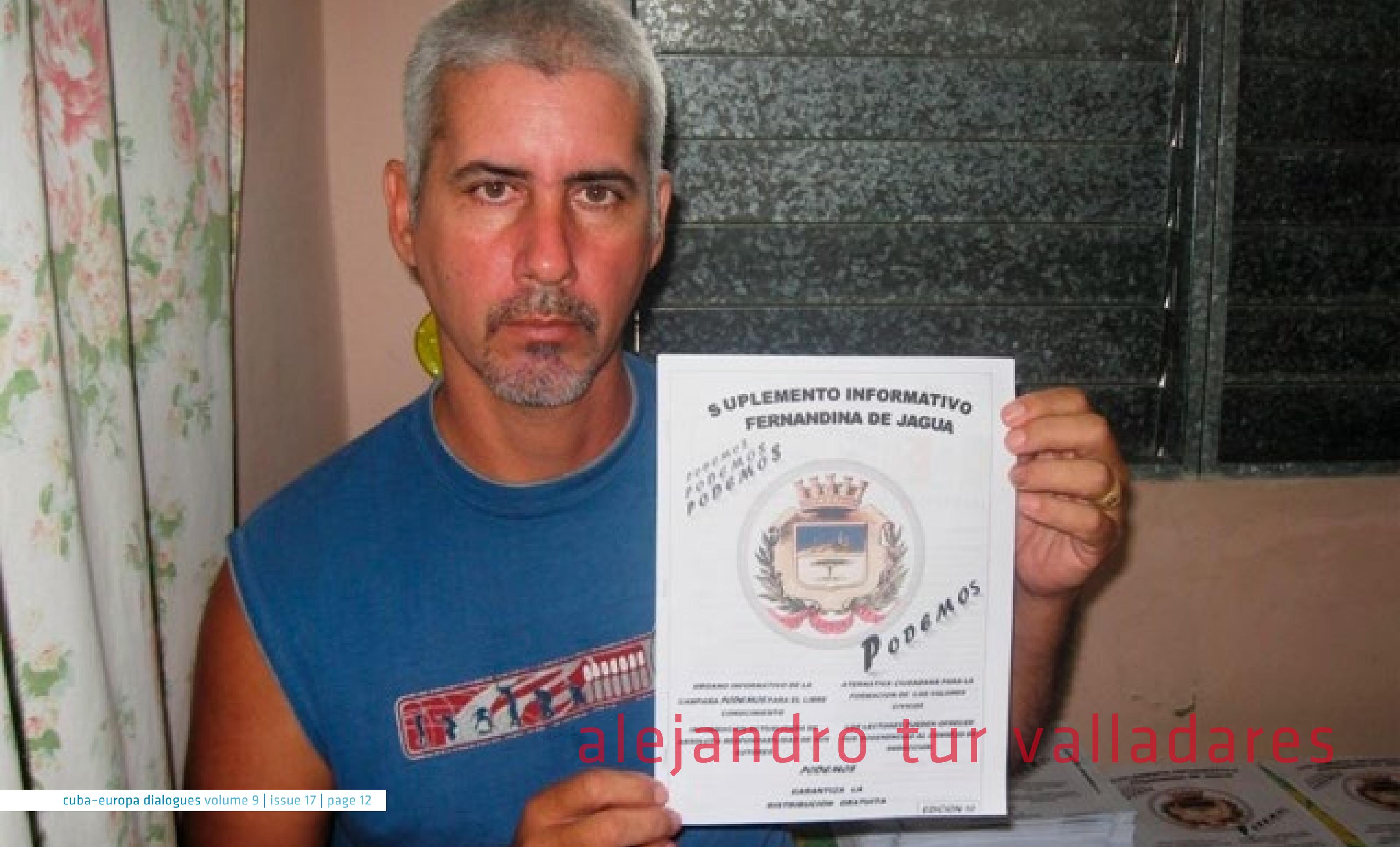
His wife, Magaly Norvis, wasn't intimidated by this. Instead, she joined the protest movement of the Ladies in White, formed by women who hold peaceful marches, calling for freedom for their relatives imprisoned for political reasons and for the release of all unjustly held prisoners of conscience in Cuba. Roberto Guerra was finally released in 2007 and a few years later he founded the *Hablemos Press* Information Center, which has become the most prestigious and efficient free press agency in the country. It even has its own website and receives high visibility on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter (@ HablemosPress).

Since its founding, *Hablemos Press* has collected hundreds of shocking testimonies reflecting the voice of the people, telling about occurrences daily ignored by the official Cuban press, which has been subjugated to a Stalinist censorship since the early years of the Revolution. The audiovisual archive of *Hablemos Press*, a civic project which is now run by 16 permanent members and countless collaborators from all around the island, is made up in particular of the following: cases of domestic physical violence or brutal acts of repudiation done by mobs directed by the government; testimonies of torture in Cuban prisons; legal injustice with regard to private property and the right to travel freely across the island and outside its boundaries; the State Security's threats to and coercion of civilians; evictions of entire families; spontaneous or announced street protests; improp-

er procedures used by forensic experts grafted from the authorities; reports on hunger strikes; natural disasters or accidents for which nobody officially assumes responsibility and many other violations punishable under international law.

The legacy of the project will be a key asset when reconstructing the history of the final years of the Castro regime and the post-communist transition in Cuba, regardless of whether it is a democratizing process or a shift to another despotic regime such as State capitalism (which seems to be already in progress under the rule of Raul Castro). These testimonies, recorded and archived in an amateur way, should be taken care of and safeguarded by global human rights organizations before it's too late, since Roberto Guerra and his team are constantly being threatened that their homes can be searched any time and all their property sequestered. This would also affect the independent library, which is part of the news agency.

Several reporters of *Hablemos Press* have been arbitrarily detained, often without charge, and some of them are still in jail. Roberto Guerra's wife has been threatened in a mafia-like manner that she and her family might get harmed. Roberto Guerra himself has been recently beaten and asked to leave the country as soon as possible if he wants to avoid fatal consequences. However, Cuban free journalists want to remain loyal correspondents fighting against anonymous injustice that has filled the nation with terror and silence. I daresay that their lives are in serious danger and that the existence of *Hablemos Press* can be considered a great miracle. Personally, every time I meet Roberto Guerra, I give him a hug, trying to conceal my tears. I hate being pathetic in front of people of such courage. Yet, although he is only 34 years old, I always feel as if it's the last time I see him. 🚫



**SUPLEMENTO INFORMATIVO
 FERNANDINA DE JAGUA**

PODEMOS

PODEMOS

ORGANO INFORMATIVO DE LA
 COMISIÓN ASISTENCIAL PARA EL LIBRO
 COMUNITARIO

SECRETARÍA EJECUTIVA PARA LA
 PROMOCIÓN DE LAS LENGUAS
 VARIAS

ORGANO INFORMATIVO DE LA
 COMISIÓN ASISTENCIAL PARA EL LIBRO
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SECRETARÍA EJECUTIVA PARA LA
 PROMOCIÓN DE LAS LENGUAS
 VARIAS

ASISTENTE

SECRETARÍA DE
 DISTRIBUCIÓN GRATUITA

EDICIÓN 197

alejandro tur valladares

alejandra tur valladares the fight for the truth

When born, he caused a commotion in the family: Although both his aunt and his father wanted to name him Alejandro, each of them for different reasons. She chose the name because she wanted to pay tribute to a Baptist pastor, the head of their church, while he preferred that the name commemorate the great Macedonian conqueror.

Alejandro grew up in an environment of all-embracing love of his mother, who managed to feed his imagination for years, and a father who started to teach him at an early age that he should distrust appearances and search for the true reality of things using any means he can find. He also taught him to stick to the truth rather than to Plato. When he was eleven, he had to be bedridden for long, successive periods of time due to a terrible disease, whose consequences he is still suffering. His mother wisely took advantage of this situation to instil in her son a love of reading. The time he had to spend in bed was a great opportunity to explore the classics of world literature. Victor Hugo has remained his favourite novelist up to the present.

His suffering along with his physical limitations and forced isolation due to the disease made him ponder about the mysteries of life, although he was still a child. The questions that worried him most were often related to injustice, and perhaps this was the reason of his early interest in politics.

He found the best teacher to be a radio covering medium and short wave bands, which allowed him to listen to radio stations from the South of Florida such as WQBA, Radio Mambí, La Poderosa and, most importantly, Radio Martí as well as some European stations – BBC Radio and Radio Exterior de

Vicente Pérez Varela →

España, through which he could travel overseas and could rip open the Iron Curtain and learn about the lives of other nations without being controlled by the government, without having to rely on the filtered content of electronic media or information censored by the State.

At the beginning of 2004, Cuba saw the founding of a movement of independent journalists. Alejandro starts working as a journalist at a time when the Cuban civic society was struggling between life and death after 75 of its leaders, among whom there were thirty independent journalists, were imprisoned in the spring of 2003.

In the beginning it was difficult. Alejandro had to move to another province to be able to take lessons or send reports. It wasn't unusual that he would travel without money and spend the whole day without eating. Yet, nothing could stop him from bringing information to the people. With no phone, no fax or computer, facing constant harassment by the Political Police, misunderstood by his family and friends (at least in the beginning), he has been overcoming one difficulty after another, nourishing his knowledge, honing his writing skills, polishing his style.

So far he has written over 200 stories and opinion pieces and hundreds of information notices. His texts have appeared in various media such as Cubanet, Misceláneas de Cuba and Martínoticias. He has done both radio journalism and print journalism. He has an insatiable need to excel himself and a permanent desire to help others who have newly entered the world of independent journalism. ←



tania díaz castro

tania díaz castro

When I met Tania Díaz Castro in person, my mind travelled to 1990. Back then, I was a young, 21-year-old officer, recent graduate of a foundation course at the Academy of Counter-Intelligence run by the Ministry of Interior.

a piece of cuban history

At that time, the offices of the State Security still echoed the names of Tania Díaz Castro, Ricardo Bofill Pagés, Samuel Martínez Lara and others who had founded the Cuban Human Rights Party two years earlier. It was a time of intense repression, because the government feared that the Soviet policy of openness could spread across the island.

As senior officers of the State Security used to take pleasure in humiliating greenhorns, whom they assigned less important cases (at the discretion of their superiors), the cases of Boffil and Tania and the like could not be entrusted to newcomers like me. My seniors were therefore charged with the task of *initiating* me into the craft. And that's what they did: They described Tania as the Lernaean Hydra, whose heads needed to be cut off.

Thus, when about a year ago I first met this Cuban mother, journalist and poet in person, accompanied by an entourage of three dogs and the same number of cats, I had a strange feeling that I had travelled back in time to meet my old enemy.

Some friends – opposition activists, told me that I was lucky that this doyenne of the human rights in Cuba received me in a friendly manner. One of my old friends, a dissident who had arranged the meeting, warned me that “she dislikes strangers, she even won't let unknown people to kiss her on the

Julio César Álvarez →

cheek”. At the time when I met Tania for the first time, I was starting up my independent journalism activities and wanted to ask her to review my first texts. Not only that she bothered to read them; as a gesture of solidarity, she also offered to send them to her friends in Europe and to inform them that about there being a new independent journalist.

I’ve seen her photos with Lezama Lima and with Carilda Oliver Labra. I’ve heard her jokes about Virgilio Piñera and I have read her poems. From the literary point of view, she is a very outspoken writer and gives everyone what they deserve, in plain language, without whitewashing. She speaks her mind at every single moment.

She is not afraid that the State Security would monitor her telephone conversations, although I warned her it might. “I have nothing to hide; you are too secretive,” she keeps saying in a reproachful way, which seems so familiar to me.

I’m glad to have met this unique woman, who had learned long before me what the pain of political imprisonment feels like. My old “enemy” has now become my friend. ↩



gladys linares

gladys linares a cuban out of the ordinary

Since the very beginning, the opposition movement against Fidel Castro has been made of all types of human beings: politicians, intellectuals, students, artists, traders, landowners, farmers, workers, housewives, priests, etc. Shortly after the Revolution, many of them applauded Fidel's several-hours-long speeches but over time they grew disappointed and finally became his bitter enemies.

Yet, Gladys Linares Blanco (Cienfuegos, 1942) is a Cuban out of the ordinary. She has never applauded Fidel, she has never put on military clothing, she has never worked for the Communist Party nor has she shouted *Patria o muerte!* (Homeland or death!) in the Plaza de la Revolución square. She has never fallen into the abyss of revolutionary ideals. She simply wouldn't trust the government with its socialist promises. Instead, she has been watching the violence and terror that the regime instilled in the people. Watching with her eyes, which are as clear as an April sky. Once she confessed that she always knew that all dictatorships are but transient tragedies.

Gladys began fighting for free Cuba in 1987, when she met Ricardo Bofill in his little apartment in Guanabacoa. He talked about human rights in such an impressive way that she doesn't miss a single opportunity to remember him. Also, she still cherishes a memory of his broken sandals.

Since that day, Gladys has been a member of the Human Rights Movement and has become a favourite of tens of thousands of Cubans whom she has provided with medicines, food, clothes and shoes. In 1995 she founded a humanitarian organization Frente Femenino (Female Front), through which she

Tania Díaz Castro →

has been sending her denunciations to partner broadcasting stations from abroad.

Again, I must say that Gladys is an exceptional woman. With her modesty and frankness, she would disarm even the smuggest person under the sun. She is sober and even-tempered and possesses lucid intelligence and elegant manners, which she had acquired in the old ages. She has never expected to receive honours, awards or tributes or make interviews that would raise her above other people. She has found the greatest satisfaction in providing support to dissidents serving their sentences in prison and to all Cubans who need it.

She receives many visitors in her small, cosy house hidden in the shade of leafy trees and plants in the Havana district of La Víbora. Her phone is always ready to receive a phone call from a suffering prisoner. Actually, it never stops ringing. Some people bring the news, others come to share their problems, which they want Gladys to publish on the *Cubanet* and *Primavera Digital* websites, to which Gladys has been contributing as independent journalist for four years.

When I told her about my intention to write about her, she told me the story of her father, Teodoro, who owned a piece of farm land and lost it to Fidel, who appropriated it and gradually turned it in fields overgrown by the marabou weed. She told me that her father died of grief. Gladys said that she will never forget that day, June 21, 1961, when the whole family was crying over the loss of the father while their neighbours – revolutionaries, staged a carnival

parade in front of their door to celebrate the death of one of the enemies of the Revolution.

Yet, Gladys says that she has forgiven them, and I believe her. For many years, she worked as a teacher and during that time she found great support in the teachings of José Martí. She mentioned a quote from our apostle Martí, which I will use to conclude: »There's only one kind of tyranny, although it can take on various forms, which might bear beautiful names or hide behind great deeds.« ↩



rolando lobaina

rolando lobaina eastern cuban leader

Independent journalism, which has existed in Cuba for quite a while now, has not had much luck. Rather, it has been crouching in the shadow of lined-up guns aiming from the offices of the Political Police, ready to do away with the enemy once and for all. However, independent journalism in Cuba can boast of several professionals who have succeeded in bringing it to the most coveted target: the people.

I have gone through hardships as well as happy moments with Rolando Lobaina and I must say it's a kind of a magic puzzle to understand the reasons why he chose this profession. Also, it's hard to imagine the courage one needs to have to be able to pursue this career. Rolando once told me he chose underground journalism because he wanted to challenge himself. Yet, this was only in the beginning. Later he realized that the profession requires rigour and commitment to the cause and that truthful reporting and responsible commenting brings up many ethical concerns.

His first articles, newsletters and flyers appeared five or six years ago. The first texts were published in the Antorcha Universitaria and Pinos Nuevos magazines and they reflected Rolando's desire to write for ordinary Cubans, who have not much else to read than the mendacious official press sold for a cheap price by state newsagents. People should write what they would like to read themselves, says Rolando.

His life has been marked by the struggle between being a natural leader of civic resistance on one hand and an intellectual who needs to overcome himself every day on the other. His articles in the El Cubano Libre and Porvenir

Luis Felipe Rojas →

magazines, the latter of which he himself directs, as well as the fact that he dived headlong to the world of Twitter or that he has been working with great dedication for the Palenque Cubano blog are only several examples of his boldness and commitment. Moreover, since he is considered the brain of the peaceful opposition in the eastern Cuba, he has become the leader of the Eastern Democratic Alliance (Alianza Democrática Oriental, ADO). In total, he dedicates himself to leadership, coaching, writing and support of education and practice of journalism, trying to bring into the open the truth hidden behind the webs of lies weaved by the regime. This is the challenge that Rolando Lobaina, information technology designer who swapped programming for the opposition movement, took up after having been subjected to beatings, arrests, and jail. Considering this, his feat of gathering dozens of activists in a region as turbulent as the eastern Cuba is more than admirable. His responsibility as general coordinator of ADO has gone hand in hand with his thoroughness and curiosity as a journalist, who inherently needs to keep investigating, searching and researching in order to always have the latest news.

Independent journalism in Cuba is now facing two challenges: first, it needs to gain more and more independence of the sterile party politics, and second, to bring information to the people. The independent journalism in eastern Cuba, which has been parented by Roberto Lobaina, has managed to succeed against all odds. The El Cubano Libre, Renacer, Porvenir, and Patria magazines keep entering the houses of the most humble and leaving them magically multiplied by the eyes that have read them and mouths that will spread the information from citizen to citizen.

If you are searching for a true example of an independent journalist's work,

just take a look at the articles, news and press releases that Rolando manages to get across the border and that also travel to all corners of Cuba like a boomerang. They are a proof of the good health of the independent journalism growing throughout the whole country and the fact that it cannot be stopped and must continue because the people need it. 🚫



wendy iriepa and ignacio estrada

wendy iriepa and ignacio estrada much more than just two people

It's said that where there's true love, all difficulties become easier. A couple of lovers is believed to develop extra potential that helps them overcome all obstacles. That's exactly what one feels when entering the small flat where my friends – a married couple, live. All their visitors are always received with the warmest hospitality you can imagine. This sui generis couple has been in the focus of attention of foreign media and independent journalists in Cuba since August 13, 2011, when they announced their marriage that took place in Havana. Dear readers: meet Wendy Iriepa Díaz and Ignacio Estrada Cepero.

Ignacio is a human rights activist known both in Cuba and abroad. He is a restless communicator and has received two Express@rte awards for the originality of his Twitter posts. His wife, Wendy, caught the attention of the public after undergoing a sex change surgery in Cuba. Both of them have dedicated their lives mainly to the defence of the rights of the LGBT community in the island, in particular its HIV positive members.

“I am so lucky to have married Wendy. In her, I've found a person who helps me with everything I do in my life, especially with the complicated and risky tasks related to the fight for the the rights of people with HIV, but also civil and political rights of all Cubans in general,” says Ignacio. “I would give my right arm for her,” he says.

“In Ignacio I've found both love and a clear and sound purpose of my life,” says Wendy. “He has brought to my life the possibility of a different future. Since we've been together, my life has taken a different course.”

Lucas Garve →

They both work as street-workers, distributing medicine and food among AIDS patients, offering them and their families psychological support, trying to solve their most urgent needs. In this way they contribute to the social acceptance of these people, who are often marginalized by authorities.

Together they have developed a project in support of social visibility of people of different sexual orientation. Several months ago they organized a march, which lead from the Capitol in the centre of Havana through Central Park to the Malecon sea wall. The event was supported by LGBT activists and a number of Cuban independent organizations and groups of various political orientation. Wendy and Ignacio are currently preparing to launch a new independent magazine on cultural and social issues, which they want to distribute in the street. They hope that it will have a strong impact among Cuban youth. Everything they do together turns into a success. With their hard work and the rightness of their cause they are able to convey to all their supporters the trust they need to lean on when carrying out their actions. Wendy Iriepa and Ignacio Estrada are one soul in two bodies. Yet, they are much more than just two people. ↩



jorge olivera castillo

jorge olivera castillo

surviving with the head in the lion's mouth

Jorge Olivera Castillo is a guest of hell – the hell of the Cuban reality. His freedom has been jeopardized only because of his practising independent journalism and pursuing literary career without a permission of the government that has turned the island into a prison.

Thanks to his nose for news and thematic diversity of his articles, he became director of the HabanaPress independent news agency, which he led between 1999 and 2003. From HabanaPress, Jorge Olivera contributed to Nueva Prensa Cubana (NPC), Cartas de Cuba and Cuba Free Press. His opinions were also regularly broadcast on Radio Martí and other stations focusing on Cuban exile issues.

He was one of the Group of 75 – the victims of the government's crackdown on its opponents, human rights activists, librarians, trade unionists and independent journalists in March 2003, which came to be known as the “Black Spring”.

Because of his constant accusations of the regime as well as his published opinion pieces, Jorge Olivera had been sentenced to 18 years in prison for an alleged crime under the Law for the Protection of National Independence and the Economy of Cuba. During the show trial, the prosecutor called him a subversive and a liar. The charge was made based on his article *Festejo de la tribu* (Tribal Celebration), which included a description of feasts celebrated by the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), which reads: “... a cup of broth is part of the ritual, in which the rules are made by famous drug dealers, snobbish prostitutes, capricious thieves, self-employed inform-

Víctor Manuel Domínguez →

ers, a mix of antagonistic characters who had joined in a celebration in which few of them believe.”

The fact that he wrote about things that all Cubans are familiar with, including issues such as drugs, prostitution and violation of fundamental rights, etc., were enough for the regime to lock him up in the Combinado prison in Guantanamo, over 800 kilometres from his home.

Jorge Olivera Castillo was freed due to his failing health December 2004. In October 2010, he rejected the offer to leave the country once and for all, which the government made to all prisoners of the Group of 75 released on parole due to health reasons (so called “libertad extra penal”).

He has never stopped practising journalism – the activity which had sent him to prison. Along with other artists whose works have also been prohibited in the island, he co-founded the Club of Independent Cuban Writers of Cuba in May 2007. Moreover, since it was clear that his conditional release could be revoked any time, he decided to write his memoirs from the prison to capture all the nightmare he suffered behind the bars: the storybook entitled *Huésped del Infierno* (The Guest of Hell) was published by the Aduana Vieja publishing house in Madrid, Spain, in 2007.

The 10 stories in the book provide a radiographic image of the terror ruling in the country’s prisons. Poet Raúl Rivero, one of the convicted members of the Group of 75, commented on it using the following words: »It’s a portrait of the Cuban reality that the government hides with the same determination

and the same despair that compels murderers to conceal the stopped hearts and congealed blood of their victims.«

In his next book, *Antes que amanezca y otros relatos* (Before Daybreak and Other Stories), published by Fundación CADAL in 2010, Jorge Olivera says that every story is like an act of exorcism exposing all the hardship of tens of thousands of Cubans in all its horror.

In his poems, Jorge Olivera gives an even more powerful image of the icy environment of a prison – the dark look of injustice as well as the hope that one day the prison system will come to an end. He has written several books of poems: *En Cuerpo y Alma* (In Body and Soul) (Prague, 2008-Gaén, France, 2010), *Cenizas Alumbradas* (Luminous Ashes) (Warsaw, 2010), and *Sobrevivir en la boca del lobo* (Surviving with the Head in the Lion’s Mouth) (Editorial Hispano-Cubana, Spain, 2012). His books of poems have been translated into Czech, Polish and French. Moreover, the Czech poet and singer Jiri Dedecek, president of Czech PEN Club, presented Jorge Olivera’s book of poems *En Cuerpo y Alma* at the seventh edition of the Escritures d’Europe Festival (European Writings) held in Normandy. The event was attended by some Cuban writers Cuban living in exile, such as Zoé Valdés and Eduardo Manet.

Jorge Olivera has been invited by the English and the Czech PEN Clubs to participate in a number of their events. However, the total of over twenty-two letters sent to the government and the Cuban Ministry of Culture (with the names of Noam Chomsky and Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize for Literature, in the header) wouldn’t make the government relent and allow him to travel.

Despite all of this, Olivera's poetry is studied at Queen Mary, University of London, along with works of Reinaldo Arenas and Heberto Padilla (both deceased).

The situation in Cuba has hardly changed over all these years; nor has the conditions of this journalist, writer, and poet. As he himself put it in one of his poems: "I keep living like a candidate for jail / someone at the mercy of barracks' inmates, / resisting the hurricane in its very centre / my face turned into the wind and a silk sword in my hand." ↩



martha beatriz roque

martha beatriz roque simply independent

Even if Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello weren't a journalist, she would definitely be "independent" because that's the word that best describes her. She has never bowed to any kind of pressure exerted on her. After 20 years of working with her I can say (without fear that I could be wrong) that the quality that best characterizes Martha is complete independence of thought and judgement.

We first met to discuss economic issues. Being an economist, I joined with her and Manuel Sánchez Herrero, our friend who is no longer alive but whom we constantly remember, to make an independent analysis of the worsening Cuban economy and reveal it to the public.

In spite of our focus on the economic analysis, Martha went further and deeper, searching for political causes of the situation. The outcome of her work was a document (which now has a historic value) entitled *La patria es de todos* (The country belongs to everyone). For this piece of independent political journalism, Martha and other three dissidents working with her were convicted for over 15 years in prison. It should be noted that Martha was the only female among the 75 dissidents, whom the regime accused and sentenced for practising fake journalism during the Black Spring of 2003.

Writing about Martha, I could focus on the great number of texts and articles that she has published in various media in Europe, USA and Latin America for more than 23 years. However, I think it is much more interesting to say something about the many years that she has been an invaluable source of inspiration for the Cuban Network of Community Communicators, which has managed to establish contact with the most faraway regions of the country

Arnaldo Ramos Lauzurique →

and inform the world about the problems they are facing and press the authorities to resolve the situation.

In September, Martha scored her latest triumph against the Cuban government when she went on a hunger strike, demanding the immediate release of Jorge Vázquez Chaviano, a government opponent whom the regime kept locked up regardless of his having served the entire sentence. After one week of her strike, the authorities announced that they would release him. Martha was determined to continue the strike as long as it was necessary in spite of her age, despite suffering from diabetes, ignoring the pleading of all her friends who came to her house, asking her not to put her life at risk. Just one more proof of her unrelenting independence. ←



yoani sánchez

yoani sánchez much more than a blogger

When I met blogger Yoani Sánchez, she was sitting on a curb of a broken pavement in Havana in front of the People's Court, where there was a second trial to convict Gorki Aguila, the leader of the Cuban punk band Porno Para Ricardo. It was on a late August afternoon in 2008. A tropical cyclone was approaching the island and you could almost smell swirls of rain and rage in the air.

The night before, Yoani and some of her friends, artists, were attacked by the Police on the Malecon esplanade, in the middle of a concert of singer Pablo Milanes, only because they were peacefully waving a banner demanding freedom for the rocker Gorki. There were still marks of violence on her body – a kind of a tattoo symbolizing her love of neighbour and the solidarity against all totalitarian injustice. Although Yoani kept talking, I do not remember one single moment when she would complain, in her perfect diction, about what had happened to her.

Instead, Yoani laughed while talking about the truth, the future and about how to summon up the strength to demand the rights of citizens in a country that has sunken into complete apathy as a result of half a century of the Revolution. Ultimately, Yoani glowed with a rare beauty of a human being who is free despite living behind a fence of barbed wire. Her rare beauty also springs from her physique: she is extremely thin and has very distinct features, which may be the reason why she is simply unforgettable.

By the time I met her, Yoani had won the 2008 Ortega and Gasset Prize for Digital Journalism for her blog *Generación Y*, which is translated into twenty

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo →

languages by a team of volunteers and which has millions of hits a month and thousands of comments on each post. *Generación Y* has become a true international forum on Cuban issues. Yoani's achievements have also been appreciated by the *Time* magazine, which included her in the world's 100 most influential people of that year. However, none of this has changed her: she's still a cheerful, virtuous and humble person dedicated to her work, which is a true rarity in an isolated society like that of Cuba, where political paranoia is the most typical national pastime.

We didn't talk much on that hurricane summer afternoon; yet, we always looked each other in the face, no fear, no hypocrisy. Yoani and her husband (independent journalist Reinaldo Escobar) then invited me to their flat, which is not far from the obelisk on the Plaza de la Revolución square, on the 14th floor of a mini-Yugoslav-type-skyscraper, a remnant of the Cold War architecture. The view of Havana from their apartment shows the city in a better light more habitable and less dictatorial.

Up there in their flat we brewed together our strategies and dreams, contemplated the possibility of creating the *First Blogger Academy 2009* in their living room, turning it into alternative space for debate, where Cubans could get advice as how to post uncensored blogs in a country where the Internet is still a privilege and not the right. Also, their flat has become the base for the *Voces* digital freelance magazine as well as for the *Voces Cubanas* platform, which was launched in the middle of 2010. This editorial project has already brought 17 numbers and has hundreds of collaborators from Cuba and abroad. Its purpose is to vindicate the right of speech and contribute to reconciliation of the nation.

Yoani Sánchez has been stigmatized countless times in the repressive national media, including the State television (the only permitted TV in Cuba). They called her *agent of imperialism* and reproved her for not knowing how to write, ignoring the fact that over a decade ago she successfully graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Letters at the University of Havana, where she obtained Bachelor's degree in Hispanic Studies (contemporary Latin American literature specialization). Moreover, after graduating she worked for many years in the *Gente Nueva* publishing house and later she became editor and webmaster of the *Consenso* independent magazine of the *Desde Cuba* digital platform.

At the moment, Yoani Sánchez is a pro-democracy activist of world renown and probably also the most widely read Cuban journalist of all times. She has an account on Twitter (@YoaniSanchez) with hundreds of thousands of followers and also her own blog, *Generación Y*. In addition to this, she regularly works for renowned mass media such as *The Huffington Post*, *El País*, *Clarín*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Washington Post*, *Letras Libres*, and others. At the end of 2009, Yoani Sánchez marked a historic milestone when she interviewed President Barack Obama. Her professional achievements might be the reason why the Cuban Interior Ministry's fears her and why it illegally keeps her hostage in Cuba. It has already denied her a permission to travel abroad more than twenty times. However, it was precisely for this – for her peaceful promotion of human rights in Cuba, why she was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize at the beginning of 2012.

For me and for hundreds common Cubans who know her, Yoani Sánchez has never ceased to be the graceful, pleasant girl you can see sitting on a curb of

a Havana street. Her achievements have not made her lose touch with reality, nor has they cushioned her dissent. Instead, she is dreaming about producing the first free newspaper in Cuba, which could become a catalyst for a democratic transition that the country is still waiting for. Knowing her as we, her friends and admirers, do, we realize that this will be the most difficult and dangerous of her battles against the monopolies of the Cuban totalitarian regime. Yet, such impossible challenges are precisely what most encourages the creativity and bravery of our Yoani Sánchez, who, besides, will never ever be alone in any of her redemptive initiatives. ↩

wartime scene

A poem about independent journalism in Cuba

Each and every morning resumed
by the high muckamucks, masters of insanity,
a war that has belched out hardly any smoke.
Roofs and timbers quietly crack
in the murmur of sad confessions of the wounded.
Barely visible bullets piercing hope all over,
giving death a permission to enter without ceremony.

It's impossible for the senses
to catch all the repulsive smell of insensitivity.
The skin slightly shrinks
in the searing heat of impatience.
The wail of a woman who has lost faith
amidst the ruins – the guardians of her fate,
gets drowned in the roaring of the latest proclamation.

Burning aside of the imperfections
is an inferno as real as the Battle of Kursk
with its its shock waves
and clouds of lead-filled dust
and hustle and bustle in the trenches
and yearning to survive and write a story of a life.

Jorge Olivera Castillo →

Half a century of wars
and always in anticipation of further barrage of exemptions
fired by soldiers dutifully following orders
barked out by commanding bureaucrats
disguised as generals.

Combat zones carry the noise
of the penultimate decree.
The banging and hammering of prohibitions
makes us watch hope with eyes full of agony.
Once again, more and more voices spell the word armistice
Out of the proverbial fear of getting lost.

There's no need of a plume of thick black smoke
or an occasional gambol of guns
to prove that death has been rambling around, bridleless and muzzleless,
across this rugged stretch of countryside of the Realm of Chaos.

Suddenly I become the focal point
to which the gaze of the police is drawn.

The corner of their eyes of a tiger
catches a glimpse of my notebook
and the pen dancing between my thumb and forefinger.

Writing without asking for a permission in this endless war
that has made us hostages of weariness and terror
is like playing with fire.

It can make you die of vertigo
in the most turbulent tornado of curses
or lean against the rough wall of insomnia
where you meet with callous indifference of ants
sleeping peacefully in the cracks and crevices of a dungeon.

july - november 2012

News from Cuba

GENERAL

Cuban activist **Oswaldo Paya**, winner of the 2002 Sakharov Prize, died on **22nd July in a car crash** at the age of 60. Paya dedicated his life to speaking out against the communist government and became one of the most powerful voices of the dissent. Harold Cepero Escalante, a fellow activist, was another victim. Two men were injured: a Swede, Aron Modig, and a Spaniard, Angel Carromero, who was driving the car.

While Aron Modig, the Swedish survivor, has been allowed to return to his country, **the Cuban authorities have charged the Spanish driver, Angel Carromero, with involuntary vehicular homicide.** Carromero was put on trial and **sentenced to 4 years in prison in Cuba on October 15.** In spite of speculation that Cuba could allow extradition of the prisoner to Spain, the two governments have not reached an agreement yet. On several occasions, Paya's family members have cast doubt on the official statement, claiming that a red car at the scene forced Paya's car off the road.

On October 16, the Cuban government announced its decision to **lift the restriction on travelling abroad under which Cuban citizens had to obtain an exit permit for foreign travel.** The official media said that the measure, which will take effect on January 14 next year, is part of the "modernization" of immigration legislation, whose purpose is to reflect the current and future situation in the country. Cubans will now only need to present themselves with a valid passport and a visa of the destination country, if needed. However, there are fears that this will produce little change in the situation of dissidents, who can be banned from travelling simply by being denied a passport.

In late October, the Hurricane Sandy struck the eastern part of the island, in particular the province of Santiago de Cuba, where there were 11 victims. Four of them died under the ruins of collapsed buildings, two were killed by falling trees. The Hurricane Sandy, which torn across Santiago de Cuba, has shown the inability of the Cuban government to deal with a disaster, regardless of its character. In spite of the moderate intensity of the hurricane, the province has been virtually destroyed as a result of the bad state of the buildings and the generally poor living conditions in the area.

According to the National Electoral Commission, **about 8.5 million Cubans have registered for general elections** slated for 2012-2013. The Cubans will be voting for authorities at national, provincial, municipal and district levels.

Pastors for Peace, committed to ending the U.S. embargo against Cuba, completed its 23rd visit to the communist island and **delivered a shipment of almost 100 tons of humanitarian aid**.

18 Cubans: 16 men and two women from Cuba landed in Florida, near Palm Beach. Under the U.S. policy known as “wet-foot, dry-foot,” Cubans who reach U.S. soil are generally allowed to stay. During the past fiscal year, 271 Cubans have arrived by boat in the United States.

Fidel Castro celebrated his 86th birthday on September 13th, without appearing on any of the public events organized to this occasion. This has started rumours about his poor state of health.

The 24-year-old **daughter of Cuban Vice President Marino Murillo defected earlier this month** and is now living in Tampa, Florida.

Cuba completed its fourth Population and Housing Census since the 1959 Revolution. The Census will reflect the number and geographical distribution of the population, its composition by sex and age, skin colour, educational level, job situation and marital state.

In the three months of July, August and September, **16 people died of cholera throughout the country** and at least 170 people were diagnosed with the illness in an outbreak caused by contaminated well-water. Although the authorities insist that the outbreak has been stopped, there is evidence suggesting that the disease has been spreading towards the east of the island, causing havoc.

Over 120 teachers from a dozen countries met in the **5th International Congress on Education and Special Pedagogy** held in Havana.

Cuba has seen the **largest number of medical graduates in its history** with 11,000 graduating doctors. According to Granma, 5315 of the graduates are Cubans, while 5694 are from 59 other countries.

A new biodiesel plant in Cuba – the first of its type – converts Jatropha seeds, rich in oil but toxic for human consumption, into a green energy source, bringing a major change to the widespread paradigm in global bio-fuel production, which usually uses edible vegetable oils.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Dissidents are being labelled as mercenaries sponsored by and in service of the U.S. to subvert the revolution. Cuba stresses it “will not permit any kind of Arab Spring to spread here”.

In early September, **30 Cuban dissidents, led by the dissident Marta Beatriz Roque, undertook an 8-day long hunger strike**, demanding the release of Jorge Vazquez Chaviano, a political prisoner kept behind the bars despite having completed his sentence. On the 8th day, the authorities informed Chaviano’s wife that he will be released.

Calixto Ramon Martinez Arias, a correspondent of the independent news agency *Hablemos Press* **was arrested on September 16 while carrying out investigation at the Jose Marti International Airport.** He was trying to find out the reasons of deterioration of a fairly large donation of medicines and other materials sent to Cuba by the World Health Organization as part of its humanitarian aid to the people of Cuba. The journalist is currently locked up in the Combinado del Este prison in Havana. **He has been on a hunger strike since 10 November.** Recently he has been transferred to a punishment cell where he has remained ever since. He is naked and receives only a litre of water a day.

On October 14, the office of the State attorney in Marianao in Havana **issued a provisional arrest warrant for Antonio Gonzalez-Rodiles Fernandez**, director of the independent cultural space Estado de SATS. Since November 7, the director has been arbitrarily detained by the Secret Political Police. Ac-

ording to the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN), he was a political prisoner. Rodiles was released without charge on November 27.

At least **37 dissidents and human rights activists were arrested** in the area between Havana and Camaguey during the government crackdown that began with the arrest of the independent lawyer Yaremis Flores on November 7, who has been condemned by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). Among the arrested there were blogger Yoani Sanchez, writer Angel Santiesteban, photographer Claudio Fuentes, Eugenio Leal and activists Arabel Villafuente, Jose Diaz Silva, Mario Alberto Hernandez and others who were protesting in front of the police station in Acosta in the Havana municipality of 10 de Octubre, demanding the release of Antonio Rodiles, who was kept there under detention.

Roberto J. Guerra Perez, director of the news agency Hablemos Press, was arrested on November 1 and was kept locked up the whole morning. **He was threatened that he and his family might be subject to great retribution if they don’t leave the country.**

According to the U.N., 2011 saw **2,400 government critics arrested or otherwise silenced in Cuba.** Brief arrests from the period of July to September include for example the former political prisoners Jose Daniel Ferrer and Angel Moya.

The general coordinator of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, Ramon Marinez Bolanos, reported that agents of the Political Police and other repressive forc-

es control main roads to prevent the Ladies in White from participating in Sunday mass.

More than 40 Ladies in White were also stopped from travelling to Havana to honour former political prisoners during the celebrations of the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, patroness of prisoners.

INTERNATIONAL

Raúl Castro paid the first official visit to China and Vietnam to see with his own eyes the effects of the economic reforms adopted by the two countries, in which capitalism was incorporated in a nominal communist regime. China pledged financial aid to Cuba as it undertakes historic economic reforms.

In late November, China handed over to Cuba the fourth vessel anchoring in the Shanghai port as part of a project of providing Cuba with 10 bulk carrier-ships, which should be completed by the middle of the next year. The project of building ships in China forms part of the efforts of the Caribbean government to restore its merchant marine. The first of the ships was made in August 2011. It is expected that the last ship will sail to Cuba in the middle of the next year.

Raúl Castro also travelled to Russia to find ways to increase and diversify commercial exchange through various projects and joint companies in sectors such as energy, transportation, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals. Russia will provide a \$150 million state export loan to Cuba to finance contracts on supplies of Russian construction, agricultural and railroad equipment.

On September 28, Cuba, along with Russia and China, voted against the decision of the UN General Council on Syria.

The first direct maritime shipment from Miami to Cuba in more than 50 years arrived in Havana in July. It marked the beginning of a weekly service by International Port Corp., which will ferry humanitarian aid to Cuba that is permissible under exclusions to the U.S. trade embargo.

A delegation from the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah visited Cuba and Venezuela at the invitation of their governments.

Norway and Cuba signed an agreement under which the European country donated \$800 000 to support the work of the Cuban medical brigade in Haiti and create health infrastructure and combat the cholera epidemic there.

Cuba has proposed new talks about the imprisoned American contractor Alan Gross, but so far there has been no response, which indicates lack of interest by Washington, a top Cuban diplomat said. The U.S. has previously ruled out the Cuban proposal of swapping Alan Gross for 5 imprisoned Cuban agents. While Gross's wife insists that her husband might be seriously ill and should be repatriated to the U.S., Cuba says his health is normal.

For the 30th year running, the U.S. keeps Cuba on a black list of alleged state sponsors of terrorism, entailing trade sanctions and restrictions on U.S. financial and humanitarian assistance.

Honduras and Cuba signed a maritime border treaty to define the boundaries of their territorial waters, to secure respective renewable and non-renewable natural resources found in the seas.

ECONOMY

New licensed businesses and relaxed property rights, aimed at attracting foreign investors, add to a growing private sector. 22% of Cubans were employed in non-governmental jobs in 2011, such as agricultural cooperatives and self-employment, increasing from 16% in 2010.

An oil well drilled by a Malaysia's *Petronas* in partnership with Russia's *Gazprom Neft* showed **existence of an active oil system, but in rock too dense to allow production.** The Venezuelan PDVSA began exploring for oil in a new Cuban location. Cuba claims it may hold 20 billion barrels of oil and it would help the island to achieve energy independence.

Cuban **tourism revenues were up nearly 13% in 2011** from the previous year, with 2.7 million visitors generating \$2.5 billion on the communist-ruled island.

Authorities advocate a large increase in Cuban custom duties. They claim they need to limit people from bringing goods for resale. This rise in import taxes will hurt Cuba's new entrepreneurs as well as ordinary people who rely on goods from abroad.

Cuban bank assets deposited in foreign financial institutions showed a **stunning plunge in \$1550 million**, or 24%, in just the last three months of last year.

CULTURE & SPORT

Celebrating Life in Union, a new documentary narrated by Andy Garcia, premiered at the 2012 New York City International Film Festival. The film unveils the tragedy and brotherhood of a group of former political prisoners from the Cuban Revolution, who fought and were later betrayed by their leader, Fidel Castro.

Former Cuban Culture Minister **Abel Prieto earned a cultural order from the French government** for his contribution to arts and literature.

After five decades, **the government has done away with a blacklist of musicians** banned from nation's radio stations for abandoning the island and speaking against the 1959 Revolution. They included Celia Cruz and Havana-born Gloria Estefan.

Cuban composer and singer **Silvio Rodriguez celebrated his 66th birthday** by singing songs on historical and current topics, some of which haven't been published yet. He sang to thousands of Uruguayans who had gathered in the Centenario stadium, the symbol of the Uruguayan capital. The concert lasted about two hours and 20 minutes and brought many songs from the singer's "Segunda Cita" album. Rodriguez digressed several times from the official program to perform songs that the audience called for, chanting, especially "Ojala".

The Cuban government has **closed a privately run cultural centre El Cabildo**, apparently the largest private business in Havana, by taking away their

license on the grounds of ‘illicit enrichment’, causing consternation among artists and intellectuals.

Viredo Espinosa, winner of the 2000 *La Palma Espinada* presented by the Cuban American Cultural Institute, **passed away**. He was a member of *The Eleven*, whose work represented the birth of Cuban abstract art and flowering of the Cuban modern art.

A team of college stars representing the United States faced off with a veteran Cuban national squad in Havana, reviving a series between the two baseball nations 16 years after it was called off at a nadir in relations.

The vice president of the Cuban Sports Institute, Jorge Polo, admitted that **27 athletes have deserted Cuba in the last two years**, which he considers a great loss for Cuban sports.

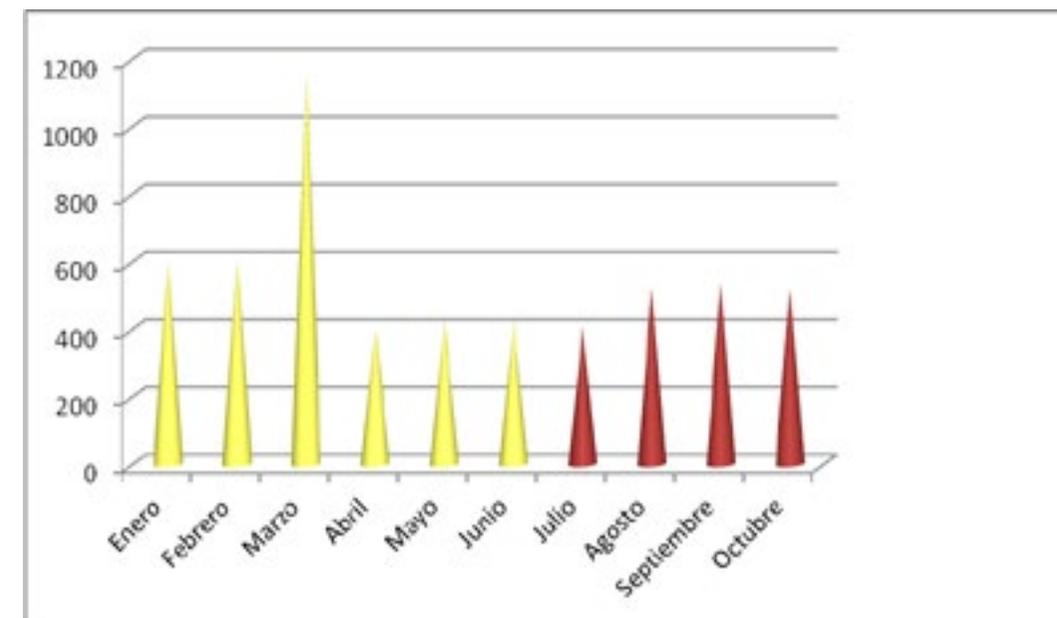
On the **London 2012 Olympic games**, Cuba received 5 gold, 3 silver and 6 bronze medals, in disciplines such as shooting, athletics and martial arts. In the Paralympic Games, Cuba won 9 gold, 5 silver and 3 bronze medals, its best performance in Paralympics as yet.

Cuba won **the third place among countries participating at the Judo Grand Slam in Tokyo** dominated by the hosting country, Japan.

2012 DETENTIONS

In the months of August, September and October, there were over 500 detentions each month.

The average number of detentions this year has been 562 arrests per month.



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