The Yellow Uniforms of Cuba

Theodore Jacqueney

In Cuba, political prisoners wear yellow uniforms, the wife of one prisoner told me in Havana. Originally, the color was meant to be punitive—the same color worn by the army of defeated dictator Fulgencio Batista, with obvious implications. "In the late 1960's," said another political prisoner's relative, "when my father was with Huber Matos and others in Cinco Y Medio prison, located five-and-a-half miles from Piñar Del Rio, a prison director tried to require political prisoners to change to the blue uniforms worn by common criminals. Led by Matos and his cell mates, political prisoners protested being lumped with common criminals, and refused to wear the blue uniforms. They were severely beaten." Some political prisoners then accepted the new color, but Matos and his followers never relented. "They were forced to go without any clothes at all for four months. The guards said that if they refused the blue uniforms they must go naked. "After four months they were permitted to wear undershorts—nothing else, not even shoes. They lived like this, in their underwear, for more than a year more—four months without any clothes, and more than a year with only undershorts. At the end, sometime in 1968, they were given the yellow uniforms again and transferred to Boniato Prison in Oriente province—where we hear that many prisoners are killed, even today. Matos and the others had opposed Batista, fought against him in every way. They had no affection for the old regime at all. But now the government has changed the meaning of a yellow uniform—for us it is now a uniform of honor."

In early October, 1976, I spent a week in Cuba interviewing released political prisoners, families and friends of still-detained political prisoners, and other underground opponents of Fidel Castro's government. Havana authorities do not grant entry visas to people known to be interested in questions of oppression and human rights in Cuba—for years officials of Amnesty International, the worldwide political prisoner relief organization, the Red Cross, the Organization of American States, and others have unsuccessfully sought permission to visit political prisoners. When a friend suggested that I join a group of progressive Republican Ripon Society members invited to tour Cuba, I neglected to mention the full range of my interests to Cuban U.N. officials charged with clearing visitors.

Once in Havana I rarely went on the thoughtfully programmed official tours. Instead, after the others had left for scheduled trips I visited people to whom I had brought introductions. One interview with a group of obviously frightened women who had overcome their fears to talk to me set the tone for many of my conversations in Cuba: The first words spoken after my contact introduced me were, "What do you hear in America about our political prisoners?" Another time, in another group, a man who carefully described himself as a "center-leftist," pleased with much about the Cuban Revolution, suddenly blurted out, "When I heard on a foreign radio broadcast of the Organization of American States investigating political prisoners in Chile, I cried. Why don't they come here and look into our political prisoners, who have been treated as harshly as in Chile and have been in prison so much longer?"

Through people like these I was able to send and receive messages from political prisoners held in maximum security, and from them I learned that for about a month prior to my October visit, political prisoners in La Cabaña Prison, near Havana, had been rejecting the food normally brought to them by the guards because the quality was "so rotten." The men were eating prison bread, when it was edible, as well as powdered milk and other foodstuffs that relatives were permitted to provide. The prisoners were not on a hunger strike, I was told, although Castro's political prisons have a rich history of hunger strikes: One particular martyr, former Matos cell mate Pedro Luis Boitel, starved himself to death in 1972, and supposedly ripped out intravenous wires when prison authorities tried to force-feed him. "Boitel weighed less than eighty pounds at his death," a hunger strike participant told me.

*Theodore Jacqueney is the director of DEMOCRACY International, a new human rights magazine project.*
"This time the men want to eat." It is just that the food is unfit. "Rotting maize porridge served with salt and water twice daily, with rice, meat, fish, and vegetables served only rarely, producing severe protein deficiencies," I was told. There are approximately four hundred political prisoners—called plantados—held in La Cabaña’s subterranean "galleries" (long, narrow prison wards sleeping about sixty to seventy men in tiered bunk beds in La Cabaña Prison, one hundred or more in other prisons, usually with one toilet per ward).

HOW MANY POLITICAL PRISONERS?
How many political prisoners are there in Cuba now? Estimates vary widely.
- The U.S. State Department and the International Rescue Committee, among others, estimate 20,000. This is the same figure Fidel Castro gave American journalist Lee Lockwood in mid-1965.
- The National Council of Churches says the figure is now 10,000.
- Some members of Miami’s Cuban exile community use figures estimating political prisoners in excess of 100,000.
- Frank Greve and Miguel Perez of the Miami Herald have written extensively on Cuban political prisoners. They estimate there are approximately 20,000–5,000 from the Revolution’s first six years, and the remaining 15,000 arrested since 1965. But, they add, "nobody really knows."
- In a July, 1975, speech Castro spoke of the 5,000 pre-1965 political prisoners, saying that 3,000 are in reeducation camps and 2,000 remain in prisons. Two thousand was the same figure cited by a foreign ministry official to Alton Frye, senior fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, when Frye visited Cuba in August, 1976.
- Other estimates include those of the Journal de Genève, which reported that there were some 50,000 political prisoners in March, 1976. In June, 1975, the Washington Post published an estimate of 25,000–50,000.
- Another responsible scholar of Cuban prisoner issues, Frank Colzon, points out that periodic waves of political arrests and prisoner releases indicate the total number of Cubans who have experienced the political prisons may be significantly larger than any present or past incarceration figure.
- The Amnesty International Report for 1975–1976 estimated "approximately 4,000-5,000" current political prisoners in Cuba. This estimate, the report says, was "based on recent Cuban government statements to visitors and public speeches by officials." Amnesty uses the same approximate figure. "Less than 5,000." for estimating the current number of political prisoners in Chile.

I communicated with cell mates of Huber Matos in La Cabaña Prison. Perhaps the best known Cuban political prisoner, Matos is a onetime Amnesty International "political prisoner of the year." He was a ranking commander in Castro’s rebel army and became military commander of Camaguey province in January, 1959, immediately following revolutionary victory. Ten months later he resigned, protesting increased Communist domination of the new regime, and was arrested on the now ironic charge of "slander ing the Revolution by calling it 'Communist.'" a charge later changed to "treason." Sentenced to twenty years, Matos has been kept in various political prisons since October, 1959. Matos was sent to a security hospital room sometime in September or October, 1976, according to information received from his cell. There were no allegations of recent torture or beatings. Matos has been held incommunicado for the past six years. Members of his family in Cuba, including his father who now is over ninety years old, have repeatedly tried to visit Matos during this period—all unsuccessfully.

The "Matos cell" was described to me as sixty square meters, underground. During the past six years between seven and sixteen men have been crowded into the cell. Seven are there now. The Matos cell is said to be kept in total darkness—a canvas sheet woven over the cell’s two windows to block the daylight has been replaced by metal sheets, which keep the room darker, hotter, and more humid than ever. An interior hall provides the cell’s only ventilation. The men are permitted to see sunlight only three days per week, for two-hour periods. "In the summer they have to carry water into the cell to pour over themselves. Otherwise they could not live because of the heat." I was told.

Almost every La Cabaña prisoner has allegedly suffered the loss of many teeth, and a few have lost them all. Prisoners are also infected by rats, mice, and "all kinds of insects." A kind of biting bedbug was described as particularly troublesome. From the Matos cell prisoners report steadily worsening vision loss caused by lack of light, limb paralysis, hair and eyebrow hair loss, stomach ulcers, and circulation problems. Another disturbing health crisis was described to me as extreme "nervousness," with symptoms explained as uncontrollable head-flickings, eye-dartings, rapid gestures, and sleeplessness—some in the Matos cell are reported to wake up screaming through the night—symptoms possibly caused by long-term, closely packed, dark, hot, damp living conditions.

Matos and a young poet named Miguel Sales are fairly well-known political prisoners, admired for their spirited resistance to authority. They are described with such words as "stubbornness," "courage," and "balls" by students I met in the university area, people from whom I solicited auto rides, and people I met in bars and snack shops—including people who admired Castro for some of the same traits and who considered themselves well "integrated with the Revolution." Even prison guards offer extraordinary deference and respect to Matos, according to people imprisoned with him.

Granja Nuevo Amanecer at Punta Brava was singled out as a prison reputed for mistreating women political prisoners. Some are kept in solitary confinement for long periods, others stacked into "galleries" at a hundred or more women per ward, it was charged. Allegations of poor food, heavy on cornflour porridge, with concomitant protein deficiencies, matched complaints concerning male political prisoners, as did charges of insect and rodent-plagued wards. The
women also report the same extensive loss of teeth that the men do. As in the men’s prisons, the women political prisoners report deplorable medical inattention, with deprivation of health care sometimes used to coerce prisoners. I was told by a relation about a woman in Nuevo Amanecer who was not permitted to have a desperately needed cancer operation “until she promised to change her political ideas and attitudes. And thus she was rehabilitated.” said my bitter informant.

I heard no allegations that systematic physical torture or beatings takes place in Cuban prisons at this time, in contrast to the unending allegations of mental and psychological cruelties. This is, of course, in sharp contrast to political prisoner reports from places like Chile, Brazil, or Uruguay. Sometimes brutalities still occur in prison, said one former prisoner, showing me ugly bayonet scars resulting from what he said was a slashing and stabbing attack by a prison guard. But such actions were, to use his word, “sporadic.” Sergio Del Valle, a Cuban Communist Party Politburo member who became interior minister in 1970 (and therefore in charge of the secret police forces and prison administration), was considered relatively more humane than his predecessor, Ramiro Valdez, who was “like Stalin, like Hitler.”

The Cuban Government offers a “rehabilitation” program to political prisoners. A prisoner who accepts may eventually receive less rigorous treatment, including possible transfer to a work camp setting where “sanitation is better, sleeping arrangements less crowded, food is better, with more protein, including fresh milk. Many rehabilitation camp prisoners are required to construct dairies.” said one freed rehabilitation camp prisoner. Rehabilitation camp inmates must do manual labor, primarily construction or mining, with occasional agricultural fieldwork; prisoners are even building a new “model prison” located near the capital that inmates call “Havana East.” On paper, rehabilitation prisoners are permitted furloughs every forty-five days. Vocational and political indoctrination classes are also provided. At one of the few scheduled events I attended, Supreme Court Justice Nicasio Hernandez de Armas told me that the indoctrination classes were voluntary. Somewhat to my surprise I learned from released prisoners who remain convinced opponents of the regime that these classes were, in fact, voluntary.

However, “accepting” rehabilitation was not always voluntary, my informants charged. I frequently heard of prisoners who rejected rehabilitation and refused forced labor only to find that at the completion of their sentences their terms had been extended a year. “The next year [the prisoner] was asked to accept rehabilitation and told that if he did not accept, he would remain for another year—and the next year, the same thing.” There were at least six or seven prisoners in this category in La Cabana, according to repeated charges I heard; and many more in other prisons. Over and over again I asked contacts why prisoners rejected the rehabilitation plan—the possibility of doing easier time and eventual freedom—for the certainty of harsh treatment and continued detention.

“More than four hundred prisoners in La Cabana have followed the example of Huber Matos and not accepted the plan,” I was told. “Rehabilitation requires the prisoner to renounce his political principles, to say they are wrong,” said a relative of one of the La Cabana four hundred. “Most of the prisoners believe that the issue causing their imprisonment is the issue of liberty, of personal freedom in Cuba, and they will not say they were mistaken about this.”

“To accept rehabilitation means he must recognize he is mistaken about what he believes in,” said another informant close to a Matos cell veteran. “And he knows that he is not mistaken, because the principle is liberty.” What, I asked, did this prisoner mean by “liberty”—what does this word mean to the associates of Huber Matos? As if a switch had been flipped, the room went silent. Afterwards people conferred in a mood of drama.

Finally, I was asked to go to a different location in a few days and meet with someone who would have an answer to this question, and other messages concerning my human rights interests—“direct from the cell.”

I followed instructions, frightened I would get myself, or some of my new Cuban friends, arrested—literally over a question of liberty. But this was the answer brought from La Cabana, which the group required me to read back to them to be sure my notes were precise: “Liberty for him is that he can say what he thinks, that he can speak freely, that he can act freely, without any coercion from the government. Liberty means freedom of beliefs, to express what he thinks without any force being used against him or the things that he expresses. Liberty is to be what you want to be, to do what you want, to believe what you want.”

A group of prisoners sent another message, put together in consultation. I was told: “Tell the world we are
suffering in Cuba’s prisons. You asked about ‘human rights’ in Cuba. In Cuba these two words are unknown. Cuba and Cubans would like to be free. Help them please. And guard the liberty you have.” Yet another Cuban dissident told me: “We hear that sometimes foreigners are permitted to visit political prisoners who have accepted rehabilitation. But permission to see those who feel strongly about liberty is always refused. Because it is said that such people are held in ‘maximum security.’ Ideas like those of Matos and the others, you see, must be held in maximum security.”

Still, I talked to a few ostensibly “rehabilitated” and released prisoners who felt as strongly about “liberty” as did the plantados in La Cabana. I asked one former prisonmate of Matos, who was an unremittent critic of the regime’s dictatorial practices and who took considerable chances in helping to introduce me around, why he accepted the rehabilitation plan.

“Huber Matos and the others who refused rehabilitation think it is most important to continue the resistance to Castro in prison,” he responded. “They think the moral issue is important: that if you resist in prison and do not accept the rules of the Communists, then your morals are high. If you accept rehabilitation, you have to admit you are wrong. But for me and my friends, our ideas are different: we think it is better to have hands that are free. Prisoners who think like Matos, and those who think like us, respect each others’ ideas about this.”

While in Cuba I formally requested permission to visit three well-known political prisoners. This I did in carefully written letters citing human rights concerns by progressive and influential U.S. leaders—letters I personally handed to about half a dozen cabinet and subcabinet officials and a supreme court justice. The three were:

• Huber Matos
• David Salvador—one of a key leader of Castro’s urban revolutionaries and who headed Cuba’s trade union confederation after the victory. Salvador was arrested in November, 1960, in an attempt to escape Cuba after Castro turned on leaders of his old 26 of July Movement who, because they held ideas of free speech, free press, free elections, and free trade unionism, opposed domi-

LETTER FROM A HAVANA PRISON

Huber Matos

If the spiritual state is holding me up I cannot say the same for my physical state. I am old and ailing. I am a shadow of the man who entered prison in October 1959. Most of my hair has fallen out, and what remains is gray or white. Deep lines run from my eyes to chin. My thick dark eyebrows have completely disappeared. Only 56 years old, but I look like an old man.

The ups and downs of my health remind me of those old worn-out suits which, despite their many patches, still have a hole here and there. The good thing is that my spirit has no holes, nor will I allow them. And if my hair has fallen out, my energies have not gone with my hair. Prison and suffering, however hard, cannot undermine my spirit.

Even so, in recent months I have had the unpleasant experience of losing the use of my left arm, the result of an occurrence you already know about. Having experienced for a year and a half the loss of using my left arm, it became obvious that my shoulder had atrophied. I have been visited by more than one doctor, amongst them a captain, a specialist in orthopedics, who diagnosed atrophy in mid-November.

At the same time he explained that the condition was incurable and that the course of treatment I should follow should aim at preventing total loss of the arm’s movement. I am following this course, which basically consists of exercises, heat and pills. I can definitely confirm that the exercises I do day after day according to the doctor’s instructions permit me to retain such movement as I may have.

I do not give much importance to this circumstance—since I was prepared for a greater loss of movement—and because my healthy spirits are not to be dampened by such clouds. From time to time I still amuse myself humming old songs. I still get up each morning and go to bed each night thinking of my dear wife and of the children.

—Excerpts from a letter to his family dated March 10, 1975, smuggled out of prison Translated from Spanish for the New York Times
nance of the new government by Communists. A foreign ministry official told me Salvador had recently been freed, but he offered no confirmation.

*Miguel Sales—a twenty-five-year-old poet whose works have been published in the U.S. Sales is honorary president of Ahadala, an organization of young Cuban social democrats in exile in the United States.*

There was never an official response to my letters or my verbal requests to see these men, although Armando Torres Santryll, Cuba's Minister of Justice, stated on two successive days when I rejoined the tour to meet him that I would "definitely receive a response before [1] left Cuba." One of Torres's statements was made on Sunday, October 10, the first day of Cuba's nationwide municipal elections, when I presented the letter to him publicly at an election polling place with about twenty to thirty Cuban officials and voters present. The entire letter was read aloud in Spanish, and the minister made his promise then, repeating it the next day in his office.

Havana contacts with whom I discussed this presentation of the letter were exhilarated. "These elections are a comedy," said one former prisoner. "Only Communists or Communist-approved candidates can run. They were selected by a show of hands at assemblies—not secret ballot—and they can be coerced from participating by the Municipal Election Committees, which supervise the election and which are controlled by Party members. No one may campaign, no one can say 'vote for me and I will order the Committees for Defense of the Revolution [the Party-controlled community membership associations with heavy police functions] to stop spying on neighbors, that if you vote for me, I will try to control the organs of State Security, the G-2 and the DGI secret police, to stop them from coming into everyone's house at any time, searching everywhere, arresting everyone.' If you could say such things, Castro and the Communists could not win a free election. A free election—such an idea is utopian, a fantasy." Listening to this outburst, another dissident added: "And so, in a voting room for an election where there can be no free discussion, and never a discussion of such a subject as three of the best-known political prisoners, presentation of your vote on a single candidate is irrelevant."

SOME NAMES

Whenever I could I asked people with direct personal knowledge of Cuban political prisoners to name people whom they knew for an absolute certainty to be in prison.

These include:

In the "Matos Cell":
- Huber Matos
- Antonio Lamas
- Osvaldo Figueroa
- Silvio Suarez

Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo
- Gevar Paez
- Jose Pujals

Matos is reportedly in a security hospital room now. No one knows why or where. Paez is also allegedly in a security hospital room in one of the two Havana-area military hospitals that usually receive desperately ill political prisoners from La Cabaña. Paez is said to have leukemia.

Others who have shared the Matos cell until they were removed in the spring and summer of 1976 to other La Cabaña "galleries" include:
- Reinaldo Lopez Lima
- Enrique Fernandez
- Jesus Silver
- Sergio Montes De Oca
- Alberto Ordaz
- Jose Manuel Martinez

Father Miguel Laredo also shared the Matos cell at one time, and is believed to still be in prison. Pedro Luis Biitel, the late martyr red hunger striker, also shared the Matos cell.

— According to my informants, most of those who have been in the Matos cell participated in the struggle against former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, and sometimes played key leadership roles in the anti-Batista fight. Some were in Castro's rebel army, others were in the 26 of July Movement that was the political arm of the Castro rebellion, and still others were in the anti-Batista student movement called the Revolutionary Directorate.

All in the Matos cell ultimately opposed Castro on issues of dictatorial practices and Communist power monopoly. I was told. Some expressed their opposition by resigning in protest, like Matos. Others insisted on testifying on behalf of other political prisoners whom they felt were unjustly arrested, and found themselves imprisoned soon afterwards. Still others claim to have been jailed simply for repeatedly criticizing Communist rule to friends. One, Eloy Gutierrez, was actually involved in military resistance against Castro. He led guerrilla struggles against both Batista and Castro in the Escambray mountains. Family members have utilized international leftist credentials and connections (a brother, Carlos, fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War) to intervene for his life.

Other political prisoners held in La Cabaña's underground cell have utilized international connections to intervene for their prisoners. Among those whose names I obtained include:
- Ramon Guin
- [?I] Fliblas
- Mario Diaz
- Andres Vargas Gomez
- Rene San Juan
- Marcelino Feal
- Francisco Grau
- Orlando Martinez
- Alberto Grau
- Pedro Martinez Fraga
- Ramon Grau
- Alfredo Izaguirre (or Izaguirre)
- Eleno Oviedo
- Eugenio Sosa Chabau
- Reinaldo Figueroa
- Emilio Rivero Caro
- Orlando Cubeli
- Most of the people mentioned here were arrested between 1959 and 1966. Officially, they are serving twenty to thirty year "sentences."

Women political prisoners whose names I obtained, reportedly now in Nuevo Amanecer, one of the worst women's prisons, include the following people said to have been imprisoned already for three years or more:

- Bertha Alman\':
- Nilda Diaz
- Ana Rodriguez
- Albertina O'Farrill
- Aleja Sanchez Piloto
- Meriam Ortiga
- Caridad Cabrera
- Neryda Polo
- Georgina Cid
- Maria Amalia
- Aricely Rodriguez
- Fernandez Del Cueto

— Although most of the prisoners presently in the Matos cell have been held there in excess of five years, it is more characteristic of political prisoners to be ping-ponged around the extensive Cuban Gulag Archipelago, sometimes bouncing from prison to prison two or three times in one year, more typically being transferred after longer periods in one prison. Among the worst prisons I heard about were:

La Cabaña
- Isle of Pines
- Guanajay
- Cinco Y, Medio (Pinar Del Rio)
- El Principe
- Nuevo Amanecer (women)
- Bonito
- America Libre (women)

Villa Marista
- (not really a prison, but a notorious G-2 secret police interrogation center. I was told). Havana East, Cuba's new "model" political prison, under construction with prison labor.

—T.J.
letter forced such a discussion publicly before the voters.'

There was one response to my letters to Cuban officials. One afternoon at 3:00 P.M. I went back to my hotel room to find a note stuffed under the door. The note, which I have kept, was written in a shaky hand, as if jotted down hurriedly in a moving vehicle or distorted to disguise the handwriting. It said: "Sr. Ted Thank for letter. Discuss please at Hotel——at bar. 3:00 time." The note was unsigned—whoever wrote it wanted his identity secured. Just then there was a knock at the door. I shoved the note into my pocket and answered the door. Into the room walked our foreign ministry tour director, who asked me to write another copy of my letter for him to present to Interior Minister Valle. He offered to sit in the room until I had rewritten my letter. I could not decline or in any way indicate that I had an appointment elsewhere; he might have me followed.

It took me more than an hour to rewrite the letter, maneuver the tour director out of the hotel lobby so I could leave the hotel undetected, take a taxi to a location close to the hotel my correspondent mentioned, and walk circuitously enough to be reasonably confident I had done everything I could to avoid being tailed. By then my note-writer was gone. I will wonder all my life who wrote that note. But I know there is at least one important Cuban official troubled enough about Cuban political prisoners that he wanted to talk privately to a Western journalist well away from the hotel where that journalist was staying. And somehow I believe that there are others.

Do Cubans talk much about political prisoners?" I asked someone knowledgeable about the underground erotic art movement in Havana but otherwise nonpolitical. "No, never," he responded. I questioned him further about his charges that the government blacklisted erotic writers and poets such as the late José Lezama Lima, Cymtio Vitier, and Eliseo Diego. Next we discussed how on various occasions he had lost jobs and landed in jail for questioning government policies at public assemblies. I asked again: "Don't you ever discuss political prisoners with close friends?" "Oh," he said, "you mean with friends. Yes, all the time."

On another occasion a girl I met talked at first about how good the Revolution has been for the Cuban people, but then she became increasingly critical. After a while, when I felt confident in talking to her, I asked questions about political prisoners. She and her friends knew of and respected Huber Matos and Miguel Sales, she said. Then she grew frightened and lowered her voice, saying: "There are many things you cannot talk about in Cuba. You have to be careful. There are lots of people with a low cultural level, who if they hear you say something critical, or even something they do not understand that they think is critical, they will jump up and call you a 'counterrevolutionary.' I do not mean you will necessarily go to prison, but you could, or you could be questioned by G-2, or your life just could be made difficult."
political prisons—all mistakes in this country are explained by the blockade. If we fail in the price of sugar, it is the blockade. If there is not enough coffee, if we do not have petrol, if prices are too high and goods are scarce, it is the blockade. In my opinion the blockade is wrong."

Another implacable Castro foe joined in urging the U.S. to try to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba. “Contacts of every kind are the best way you can help us,” he said. “I know that some anti-Castro groups in the U.S. do not agree with this, but I say to them that I cannot win my war with Castro with a blockade or by bombings like the one in Barbados.” (An Air Cubana civilian passenger liner had been blown up in midair, killing seventy-three, en route from Bridgetown, Barbados, to Kingston, Jamaica, to pick up our tour group and take them to Havana. For the entire week I was in Cuba the government media featured denunciations of the bombing, and it seemed on every dissident’s mind.) “The bombing is a great argument for Castro,” the man continued. “He now portrays all of his opponents as counterrevolutionaries who kill innocent civilians by bombing airplanes. The people who did this are mad."

“Instead of bombings,” I was told, “we need the activities of Cubans in your country concentrated on opening up Cuba to penetration. It means diplomatic relations, it means ending the embargo, it means radio broadcasts, and more journalists stationed in Havana.

“My friends and I hear about the underground in Russia, about Samizdat, about Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov and others of the Russian resistance. Do you think we do not have our Cuban Solzhenitsyns, our Sakharovs? How could we not, when we are so close to your country and respect the ideas of your country, the democratic process, freedom, liberty? Of course we have people like them here. But how is the world to know, and how can they be protected by world opinion, like the Russians, if there are no journalists here to meet them and write about them, if Castro can arrest them and they disappear?”

Speaking with one dissident group before I left Cuba, I asked: “What do you want for Cuba?” One person spoke for the group: “I want for Cuba social development, free elections, not compulsion or one-party elections. I want an end to compulsion. But I want to keep many of the good things the Revolution has brought—equality, an end to privilege, welfare for the people. Not everything Castro has done is bad—only the most important thing. But the social and economic policies, many of those I support. Most of my friends think the same way. We just think you can do all this without compulsion, with liberty, too.”

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**LETTER PRESENTED TO CUBAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS OCTOBER 5-12, 1976, BY THE AUTHOR**

Please accept this note as a formal, respectful request which I ask you to convey to the proper authority. I ask to visit three men who are regarded to be “political prisoners” in Western Europe and North America: Huber Matos, David Salvador and Miguel Sales....

I am a journalist by profession, and I feel strongly that articles written from personal observation concerning the proper treatment of prisoners could help to overcome one of the principal obstacles to normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations. That obstacle is the issue of human rights and political prisoners in Cuba.

The issue of Cuban political prisoners is raised by the increasingly potent Cuban-American voting bloc, by people like Senator Henry Jackson of the state of Washington, and George Meany, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. labor unions.

However, Cuban government authorities should understand that concern about Cuban political prisoners does not come mostly from more conservative elements in the U.S. It is a very serious matter to progressive people, who respect the accomplishments of social justice and economic development brought about by the Revolution. You should know, for example, that Amnesty International, the world-wide political prisoner crusade organization, is the fastest growing membership organization in the U.S., and in Sweden and West Germany as well.

There is also a movement in the U.S. Congress, led by people like Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota and Senators Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts and Alan Cranston of California, that is becoming increasingly important as a bloc vote for human rights issues.

Moreover, some of the people likely to occupy important positions in Jimmy Carter’s administration if he is elected president, like Cyrus Vance, Paul Warnke and others, are very concerned about Cuban political prisoners, as I learned when I talked to them before coming to visit your beautiful country.

Finally, let me add one personal note in what I hope appears to you to be a formal and respectful letter: the family of the first man on my list, Huber Matos, lives in my home town of Elizabeth, New Jersey. His poor old wife, who has not seen him in so many years, may merit consideration in my request to see Matos, simply so that I can bring back word from personal observation that he is alive and well.

Surely all of us would want our wives treated to this humanitarian consideration if fate had conspired to put us in the cell where Matos is now....

Most Respectfully Yours,

Theodore Jacquency