



Cuba

No surrender by independent journalists, five years on from "black spring"

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Five years ago, between 18-24 March 2003, police arrested 90 opponents of the Fidel Castro regime, 75 of whom were then sentenced to prison terms ranging from 14 to 30 years for “damaging Cuba’s territorial integrity and economy”. Among them were 27 journalists. At the time it looked like this “black spring” would put an end to independent journalism in communist Cuba. But it didn’t work out like that at all.

Today, most players agree that there are as least as many independent journalists in Cuba as there were before March 2003, which was seen as the high noon of the era of the free press. More importantly, the quality of their writing has improved. News agencies were created and networks forged. These were the conclusions of a special correspondent for Reporters Without Borders who carried out an on-the-spot investigation in the last week of February 2008, coinciding with investiture de Raúl Castro as head of state. Those interviewed were independent journalists, political opponents, families of imprisoned journalists and foreign correspondents. Reporters Without Borders is not officially allowed to visit Cuba.



Raúl Castro

“The simple fact of no longer sensing Fidel’s threatening form over our heads has helped ease the pressure”, says Yoani Sánchez, one of the country’s most influential bloggers. “The government does not give ground of its own free will. We are seizing the space for ourselves”. The retirement from political life of the Líder Máximo - temporarily since the end of July 2006 and finally with the appointment of his brother Raúl to the presidency of the State Council - has almost imperceptibly lifted both spirits and pens. Journalists, many of whom came into the profession via human rights activism and opposition to the Castro regime, say they are no longer afraid.

Expected for years, Raúl Castro’s signing of the two UN human rights pacts (one relating to economic, social and cultural rights, the other on civil and political rights) certainly is a sign of goodwill. In his investiture speech before the National Assembly of Popular Power on 24 February, the former army chief become head of state, even said, “The best solutions come out of the exchange of deeply-held opinions”. A declaration, practically a promise, that was carefully scrutinised by political opponents. The release on 15 February of four prisoners of conscience who immediately left for exile Spain, including independent journalist Alejandro González Raga, was a first step.

However, 55 of the ‘group of 75’ arrested in 2003, are still languishing in Cuban jails, including 19 journalists. And those who enjoy relative freedom, are systematically excluded from public posts, monitored, bullied and above all prevented from disseminating news to Cubans, to whom they chiefly address themselves. The island’s some 11 million population has to content itself with *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde*, the two press organs of the Cuban Communist Party, which every morning disgorge Castroist rhetoric giving them no chance of access to any alternative news.



Alejandro González Raga

“My husband is very sick”

Eight of the 27 journalists imprisoned during “black spring” have been released in dribs and drabs. “This was not a humanitarian gesture but rather a trade off in exchange for the good will of Europe and Spain in particular”, says Laura Pollán, wife of Hector Maseda Gutiérrez, one of the co-founders of the *Grupo de Trabajo Decoro* agency,



Hector Maseda Gutiérrez

who is serving a 20-year sentence in Matanzas prison. The eight who have been released were granted a “release on licence” - a conditional release on health grounds. “But if you put one foot wrong, you are back in that hole again”, said Oscar Espinosa Chepe,

journalist and economist, who has not allowed this risk to stop him writing.

Political prisoners have a separate status. “They are more closely watched than the others,” says Laura Pollán. But most of them endure the same poor hygiene and appalling food as the common-law prisoners. Some are imprisoned outside their own province. “It’s a way of punishing the families”, sighs Laura Pollán, who makes the journey from Havana to Matanzas, 90 kilometres east of the capital every two months for a family visit and every three months for a conjugal visit. At 75, Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez, Cuba’s oldest journalist prisoner, has found the strength to write a book, *Enterrados vivos* (Buried Alive) published in Miami, describing his prison conditions and daily life inside. “He wrote it very small on sheets of paper which he rolled up like cigarettes, said Pollán. “He had them passed to common-law prisoners, who are less watched, who gave them to their family members who in their turn gave them to me.” Pollán typed them out on a laptop computer which she was given by an Argentinean tourist



Manuel Vázquez Portal

Reporters Without Borders' correspondent, Ricardo Gonzalez Alfonso, who is imprisoned at the Combinado del Este jail in Havana, is not doing so well. His wife, Alida Viso, said he has had four surgical operations since January 2005. "My husband is very sick", says an angry Viso, who has had to drop her own journalistic work, for lack of a telephone. At the beginning of February 2008 she put in a request for his release on licence. "He has kept his morale up though, despite everything," she said. The 58-year-old, founder of the *Manuel Marquez Sterling Society* has secretly written two poems (*Historia sangrada* in 2005 and *Hombres sin rostros* in 2006), in which he speaks out against being deprived of his freedom. He spent a long time in convalescence at the military hospital at the Combinado del Este, but was sent back to his cell when his wife asked for a suspension of his sentence for medical reasons.



Ricardo Gonzalez Alfonso



Ladies in White

Wives, mothers and sisters of 'the 75', The "Ladies in White" demonstrate every Sunday after mass at the Santa Rita church in Havana and are frequently subjected to harassment. The group, along with Reporters Without Borders, was awarded the 2005 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. The "Ladies" were prevented until the last moment from entering Havana cathedral where the Vatican number two, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who visited Cuba from 20-26 February was due to officiate at a mass. They were finally allowed to attend the celebration but were kept at a distance. Fifteen Spanish, Bosnian, Swedish and Peruvian women planning to join the 'Ladies' on their Sunday march were prevented by police from leaving their hotel on the eve of Worldwide Human Rights Day on 9 December 2007, and were subsequently expelled from the country. Police also confiscated human rights literature which the woman had handed out to passers-by.

The apolitical and peaceful movement is an important component of the opposition in Cuba. They

then sent them to Miami, to Manuel Vázquez Portal, another journalist of the group of 75, who was released in June 2004. It was published with the help of the Florida-based Grupo de Apoyo a la Democracia (Support Group to Democracy).

are supported by the Miami-based NGO, made up of Cuban exiles, "Plantados hasta la libertad y la democracia en Cuba", which sends each of them 50 dollars a month, which they spend mainly on buying food for their imprisoned relatives and the travel costs of prison visits. The authorities deduct 10% of the money in tax when it is changed into convertible pesos.

“People got scared after the black spring”

The number of independent journalists in Cuba is hard to establish with any certainty. There are believed to be around 150. There are in any event more of them than before March 2003. The only portal, based in Florida, *Cubonet*, groups 64 Cuba-based contributors from 11 different agencies. Also Florida-based, the *Nueva Prensa Cubana (NPC)* regularly broadcasts brief radio spots by around 20 journalists. In Cuba itself, the press freedom organisation, *Asociacion Pro Libertad de Prensa (Association for Free Press - APLP)*, founded in



José Antonio Fornaris

2005 and chaired by José Antonio Fornaris, has 69 members. These figures of course provide only a rough idea. Some journalists can belong to several of these bodies, but it does show how independent journalism has recovered since March 2003.

The "black spring" nevertheless struck a terrible blow against independent journalism. Stunned by the imprisonment of 27 of their colleagues, many journalists decided to throw in the towel or to go into exile. "At the time, people got scared and stopped writing," recalled Miriam Leiva, one of the leaders of the Ladies in White. Then they began writing articles again, first anonymously and then using their by-lines once again."

Some agencies, such as the *Manuel Marquez Sterling Society*, did not survive the crackdown. Founded in 2001 by Reporters Without Borders's Cuba correspondent, Ricardo González, sentenced to 20 years in 2003 and still in jail, this centre for training and editing, managed to print three numbers of the magazine *De Cuba* but other agencies, which stopped work for a while, reappeared. These include *Cuba Press*, founded by Raúl Rivero - released at the end of 2004 and exiled to Spain the following year - *Nueva Prensa*,



Raúl Rivero

Havana Press, *Felix Varela* and la *Cooperativa Avileña de Periodistas Independientes (Avilena Independent Journalists' Cooperative)*, whose leadership are or were in prison. Some 20 known small agencies send their articles or radio

spots to foreign-based online portals, including in Miami, like *Cubanet*, *Nueva Prensa Cubana* and *Payolibre*.

The ranks of these agencies have also been swelled by new organisations which have been created since March 2003: *Cubanacán Press*, *Jagua Press*, *Villa Blanca Press*, *Jovenes sin censura* (Youth against censorship) and the *Agencia libre asociada (Alas)*, the most recently founded, in Havana in November 2007.

Journalists on the inside for the outside

Publications founded and published by dissident journalists are rare in a country or state which has a monopoly of news and the means of broadcast and printing. *De Cuba* and *Vitral* were the only two striking examples and now belong to the past. No independent newspaper is currently on sale in Cuba, apart from a few pages photo-copied from the magazine *Consenso* produced by the *Arco progresista* (Progressive Arc) party. A few newspapers and magazines based outside Cuba do reach the island and are sold secretly like *Primavera de Cuba* (Cuban Spring), a newspaper produced by dissidents in exile Sweden, launched in 2006 and appearing quarterly. “We don’t receive many of them but we distribute a lot of them”, said Miriam Leiva. The magazine *Enepecé*, produced by *Nueva Prensa Cubana* in Miami, and *Encuentro en la red* reach a small circle of initiated. In general, independent journalists are condemned to write from the inside for people outside the country. Cubans whom they talk about and to whom they address themselves will perhaps never read them.

There is still the Internet but most Cubans are excluded from it because access is very restricted and costs are very high. Apart from the public Capitole building in Havana, most cyber-café’s are reserved for tourists. Even when access is possible, a lot of dissident websites are blocked including *Cubanet*, *Carta de Cuba*, *Payolibre*, *Encuentro en la Red* and *Damas de Blanco*. Even if no error message appears, the home page of the *Nueva Prensa Cubana* website does not appear to work in Cuba. The websites of *Bitácoracubana*, *Desde Cuba*, the blog of Yoani Sánchez and the Reporters Without Borders and *Miami Herald* sites are, surprisingly, accessible.

Desde Cuba and the Yoani Sánchez phenomenon

It is said that she is read by the reporters on the union of young communists’ newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* and at the highest levels of the regime. On



Yoani Sánchez

her blog *Generation Y* (www.desdecuba.com/generaciony), Yoani Sánchez, age 32, personifies the new generation of journalists, un-phased by their elders who lived through the coming of communism. “The 25-40 age group got themselves given exotic or Russian names starting with a “y” she explains. It is a disillusioned generation which did not experience the glorious era of the revolutionaries of the Sierra Maestra”. The young woman works openly with her photo, her name and her mini-CV in philology. “Having the courage to sign my name is a way of matching my values with my actions”, she said, seated at a table in the apartment she shares with journalist Reinaldo Escobar.

Born into a working class family, Yoani Sánchez wasted no time in acquiring a reputation as a rebel. “I began to get into trouble when I wrote my thesis on the literature of the dictatorship”, she recalled. Her meeting with her husband, Reinaldo Escobar, was decisive: Formerly with *Juventud Rebelde*, he was forced to resign after writing controversial articles. Yoani Sánchez decided to use the joys of blogging to express her rebellious spirit: “I discovered the power of blogs in Moroccan and Chinese opposition circles”. The young mother quickly made herself a name in her outspoken and straightforward columns in which she prefers to talk about every day life for Cubans rather than lose herself in abstractions. In one she compares the difficulty in understanding a speech by Raúl Castro with that of French Egyptologist Jean-Francois Champollion in deciphering the hieroglyphs.

Yoani Sánchez’s blog is only part of a huge portal *Consenso/Desdecuba.com*, run by five bloggers and a six-person editorial committee. Its objective is basically to comment on the country’s political



Manuel Cuesta Morúa

news. The website can boast that it has reached more than 1.5 million clicks in February after just a year in existence, 800,000 of them going to the *Generacion Y* blog. More impressive still, 26% of the hits come from Cuban residents, third behind the United States and Spain. The website was launched in February 2007 by a team from the magazine *Consenso* linked to the social-democrat opposition figure Manuel Cuesta Morúa. Turbulent times can create divergence and Manuel Cuesta Morúa for his part launched the *Grupo mediático Consenso*. The two then began a fight for the label “*Consenso*” which means ...”consensus”.

The *Grupo mediático Consenso*, created in December 2007, groups around 30 journalists and presents itself as a global cultural project and a

production of the Progressive Arc party. It comprise a magazine, archives and a periodical which is about to produce its seventh issue. The weekly is secretly printed using office printers and about one hundred copies are sold at two convertible pesos (two dollars).

Convivencia or the revenge of the Vitral team



Dagoberto Valdés

The only written press title that was relatively outspoken and sold for many years is no longer in existence. Catholic magazine, *Vitral* founded in 1994, was forced out of business in April 2007. The high quality publication of 30 to 80 pages that had a circulation of 10,000 and 8,500 subscribers became the flagship of civil society expression. “Thanks to the network of dioceses and the Intranet network used by the church, its articles went to the four corners of the island,” former editor Dagoberto Valdés recalls with some bitterness. Administrative red tape and paper shortages - genuine ones - partly explain why the title disappeared. “But we could have kept going with the budget we had,” said Valdés. “In fact it was the arrival of a new bishop, closer to the regime, which changed everything.” Since its creation in 1994, the magazine, based at Pinar del Río in western Cuba, adopted an unprecedented outspokenness in a very tightly controlled media landscape. But a series of editorials comparing the Way of the Cross and the daily life of Cubans under the communist regime was the last straw for the new bishop, Jorge Enrique Serpa, who feared trouble from the country’s political leadership. The prelate began by rejecting the *Vitral*’s journalists’ articles, whether religious or secular, saying that they had no influence in his diocese. “In April 2007, we said that in the circumstances we would not continue with the newsletter put out by Intranet,” Valdés continued. “Faced with protests against the closure, from both inside and outside the country, the bishop re-launched *Vitral*, but on a purely pastoral basis. The new magazine is nothing like the old one.”

Shunned at mass celebrated in the church at Pinar del Río and forced to resign, 12 members of the *Vitral* team were left facing a dilemma. “We finally made the difficult choice to stay within the church and within Cuba and not to become dissidents”, Valdés continued. But after a one year “sabbatical”, as they termed it themselves, one section of the staff in February 2008 founded online magazine *Convivencia* as a space for expression by civil society with a part devoted to human rights and another for culture and history. In a sign of the

developing solidarity within the independent media, Yoani Sánchez is working as a technical consultant.

Since the Catholic Church, while disliked is tolerated by the regime, the Catholic press has managed to carve itself out a degree of freedom. Each diocese has its own magazine. Closely linked to the one in Havana, *Palabra Nueva* (*New Word*) crosses the official line but cautiously. In its February 2008 edition, editor Orlando Márquez had no hesitation in recalling the words pronounced on the tarmac of José Martí airport by Pope Jean-Paul II during his 1998 visit to Cuba about the “anguish in Cuba caused by material and moral poverty, the inequalities and limits of fundamental freedoms”. In his column headlined “To overcome anguish”, the journalist added that the cause of Cuba’s troubles were “as much external as internal”, citing variously, the Bush administration’s policy, the shortage of necessities, a crisis in education, discrimination and restriction of freedom: evils relayed, he said, during public debates organised by the regime since Raúl Castro took power.

“People are no longer afraid to call us”

Cuban journalists, both experienced and beginners, have understood what they can get out of this transitional period. A significant part of their work is dissecting the words and appearances of the regime’s leaders and gauging the direction the regime could go in, including spending more time reading the official press.



Miriam Leiva

Cuba’s best known journalists, such as Miriam Leiva and her husband Oscar Espinosa Chepe, who have a thorough knowledge of Cuban news and political history, are often sought out by foreign media. They contribute to titles such as *El País* (Spain), *Libération* (France), and the Paris-based *International Herald Tribune* as well as various Latin American dailies. The more striking news items, such as the recent death of a Havana schoolboy who was mistreated by his teacher, revealed by Jaime Leygonier, a Havana-based freelance, can sometimes be picked up by the *Miami Herald*, thus showcasing independent journalism in Cuba.

Journalists looking for news can also be helped by their fellow citizens. “People are less afraid now and come to us quite easily”, they all agree. “They call on us to expose a case of unfair imprisonment or a cancer victim who is unable to get treatment, for example”. An enthusiast for human interest

stories, Leygonier gives an example of something that happened to him. “When I was not allowed to have custody of my daughter when I divorced, I felt the need to express myself about it,” he said. “That’s how I wrote my first article and I sent it to José Antonio Fornaris, of the *Cuba Verdad* agency. Leygonier recently reported on a drunken man found lying in a cave, who turned out to be a veteran of the war in Angola, in which Cuban troops helped a Marxist movement to defeat South Africa between 1975-1991. “His brothers had sold their house to raise the money to go into exile and the man was left homeless.” A story that also reflects reality in Cuba.

Expelled from the sugar ministry for his opinions in 1990, Carlos Ríos Otero of the Habana Press agency kept up with his official contacts. “Many people go on working for the government but without supporting it so they are happy to talk, but anonymously” he said. But the frequent use of anonymity limits this relative “freedom of sources” and cross-checking news with official sources is impossible.

“I would live to be able to write for *Granma*”

As well as being more numerous and better informed, independent journalists are now also better organised. Since the failure of the *Manuel Marquez Sterling Society* which also served as a training centre, others have picked up the baton. Guillermo Fariñas and his *Cubanacán Press* agency based at Santa Clara have taken on the role of setting up journalist training workshops throughout Oriente province.



Guillermo Fariñas

None of Cuba’s dissident journalists are really professionals. Some of them have high-flying academic backgrounds, others less so and there is no free press model or a flagship media to serve as a reference point. Everything has to be invented. Most have entered the profession as a result of a personal and sometimes visceral rejection of the current regime. “We are trying above all to bring about the emergency of a civil society in a country where it has been reduced to almost nothing”, says Valdés. “The aim is to make the regime pay the political cost of its mistakes and abuses by publicising them,” adds Fariñas. “The leadership is not answerable to anyone.” How is it possible to remain objective when one is pushed into dissidence on the margins of Cuban society?

Sometimes the articles are over-political and lack detachment. “All means of communication are in



Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia

the hands of the regime”, says Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia, 23, of the *Jovenes sin Censura* agency. So necessarily we do our best to show the other face of power, the uglier one. I would like to be able to write for *Granma*, but there is no room for a critical gaze from inside the system”. Yoani Sánchez, through her blog *Generacion Y*, makes no bones about her subjectivity: “I write in the first person, based on my personal experience, my age and convictions.” The border between independent journalism and political opposition turns out to be very tenuous. “Many opposition figures are journalists and all independent journalists are considered to be in opposition,” Jaime Leygonier sums up.

“They sacked me from every job I ever had”

Opposition figures then and treated as such. Seen as “harmful”, sometimes called “mercenaries”, “enemies of the revolution” or “CIA agents”, independent journalists are systematically persecuted. Apart from the 19 arrested during black spring, four have been jailed since 2005 and three more since Raúl Castro took over. Today, dissidents have less fear of a new “black spring” - which would be too obvious for a regime in search of international credibility - than a low intensity war.

State security agents (political police) have a whole range of methods at their disposal to put them under pressure. In a communist country where virtually all employment is in the control of the state, the simplest method is to deprive journalists of their jobs. “They sacked me from all my jobs, so I earn my living repainting houses and doing odd jobs”, says former government employee Carlos Ríos Otero. There are many examples: Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia was sacked from a tobacco factory, Jaime Leygonier from his job as a teacher and Dagoberto Valdés was forced out of the management of a major cigar factory. In fact, most independent journalists do not have fixed employment.

News gathering very often exposes them to the risk of brutal attack. Maria Antonia Hidalgo, of the *Holguín Press* agency in the eastern city of the same name, said she was beaten up when she was pregnant. Others, such as Reinaldo Escobar, of the *Consenso/Desdecuba.com* collective have been held in police stations for several hours before being released. Repudiation meetings - “actos de repudio” – are also highly popular: Scores of residents surround a district and gather “spontaneously” in front of the home of their target to

shout insults, throw missiles and sometimes cover the house with graffiti. “It’s a ghastly experience”, said Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia who has been a victim of it. The young journalist from *Jóvenes sin Censura* was also held in custody by state security for six days in December 2006 after having all his work equipment confiscated: computer, notes and camera. Added to that is the well tried method of mutual surveillance and the marginalisation of dissidents. “The neighbours treat me as though I was radioactive”, smiles Yoani Sánchez.

On occasion more unusual means of pressure are applied. Sanchez, who is used to “cyber attacks”, as she calls them, she also receives insulting comments on her blog and “copy-and-paste” of articles which are nothing like the stories she tells. To anyone surprised at the extent to which she seems so immune to state security malice, she replies, “My weapon is publicity. The authorities know that it would be talked about if they attacked me”.



Jaime Leygonier

Jaime Leygonier said that his own 14-year-old daughter was told to spy on him and to go through his belongings. State security also had a fake advertisement appear saying the journalist wanted to swap his house (the sale of homes is banned) describing it as magnificent and well located. “I had phone calls from half of Havana,” he recalled. “It was a form of harassment.” Most journalists either have their phones tapped or think they are. It is very hard to evaluate the level of surveillance but the possibility of being listened in on or watched is enough to breed paranoia. Journalists rarely talk freely on the phone, making use of code. “I jump when anyone knocks on my door and I am suspicious if anyone looks at me in the street,” says Leygonier. “You need to have something of a Kamikaze approach”.

“Getting by”

The issue of retribution against dissident journalists, excluded from public employment, is a bit of a mystery. “Being a journalist in Cuba does not make you money, on the contrary it costs money”, Reinaldo Escobar explains. Paid-for articles or radio pieces are rare and uncertain. *Cubamet*, funded by US Aid, which aims to restore democracy to Cuba, gives a helping hand to journalists working for them and *Nueva Prensa Cubana* does pay them. “But payments were interrupted in 2006 [because of the risk, note], before resuming soon afterwards, said Jaime Leygonier. “I didn’t understand, so I stopped working for them”. The Madrid-based *Encuentro en la Red* does pay reasonably



Oscar Espinosa Chepe

well, but according to Oscar Espinosa Chepe, makes less and less use of Cubans within the country. Income is also made up by occasional donations from various countries connected to prizes and various forms of awards.

As Miami is home to the largest number of Cubans outside of Havana, the US government has on three occasions between 2004 and 2007 paid out tens of millions of dollars to destabilise the regime and the United States remains the most generous financier of Cuba’s dissidents. But accepting this money or any US aid fuels Castroist rhetoric about “collaborating with the enemy”. “My website is hosted by Germany, not the United States and that is so much the better”, says Yoani Sánchez. “We avoid support from the United States”, stresses Manuel Cuesta Morua, “going first to Europe if we can”. “I don’t receive or look for any financing,” says Sánchez, adding that she only accepts Internet access cards and software given to her by friends. “There is no way I want to limit my independence.”

Like the rest of the population, dissident journalists also benefit from the *libreta* (the rationing card which gives them the right to certain necessities) such as cheap water and telephone and free housing. For the rest - because these definite advantages of the communist regime don’t necessarily allow them to make ends meet each month - independent journalists resort to ‘system D’. “My husband Reinaldo Escobar and I have tourists visit Havana and we give Spanish lessons,” says Yoani Sánchez. “We get by, we get a few presents and friends help one another”, says Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia.

“I write my articles by hand”

For lack of resources, independent journalists find themselves back in the time of pioneering French journalist Albert Londres: writing articles by hand or on a type writer, without cameras to illustrate their work or cars to get around in. “We file our articles by phone after writing them out by hand,” explains Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia, who has had all his equipment seized. Since telephoning abroad is very difficult, journalists wait at the “headquarters” apartment in central Havana of *Habana Press* for a call from *Nueva Prensa Cubana* in Miami to dictate their radio pieces. “I type out my articles at the home of another dissident who owns a computer,” says Leygonier. He then sees that my articles are sent: sometimes I don’t even know where they have been published.” Some better known or luckier journalists have managed to get themselves

computers. They are generally obtained as presents because it is forbidden to buy computer equipment in Cuba except with express permission and the black market price is prohibitively high. These privileged few can at least write their articles but things get tougher when it comes to sending them. Not one of the dissidents interviewed for this report had private Internet access. Two of the capital's three public cyber-café's have closed since 2006 and the only one still open, in the Capitol building in central Havana, charges five convertible pesos (or dollars) an hour. “Ninety-nine per cent of my work is done off line,” says Sánchez. “So a one-hour card can sometimes last me three weeks, at the rate of twice a week.” A few daring journalists try their luck in the hotels, where access is banned for Cubans.

The other possibility is using foreign embassies. Some of them - France is not one of them - or the US Interests Section (USINT), which acts as the US embassy, do allow dissidents to use computers but several users say that in reprisal these embassies are subjected to satellite interference which slows down connection speeds.

With 24 computers available, the USINT, is the main access providers, but navigation is very limited, particularly since 11 September 2001 and the stepping up of security. “We can't use USB memory sticks for fear of viruses, or postal envelopes for fear of an anthrax attack,” says Miriam Leiva. State security constantly watches the embassies' entrances and exits to check on the comings and goings of opponents. Once they even set off an alarm at the moment a dissident entered one of the diplomatic buildings.”

Banning USB memory sticks is a real handicap for dissidents who tend to write their articles and emails offline. The USINT has taken a new step a few weeks ago by allowing camera memory cards in certain conditions, with which one can send professional photos only and in a format of less than 100 KB).

The struggle of foreign correspondents

The election of Raul Castro by the National Assembly on 24 February 2008 prompted a minor revolution in relation to Cuba's foreign correspondents. “The deputies came over to speak to us at the end of the session,” said one astonished correspondent for a major US daily. “That has never happened before. They didn't say very much to us, but it was already an improvement”. Apart from this gesture however, the work of foreign journalists has more in common with an assault course, starting with obtaining a press visa which has to be applied for at the Cuban embassy in the journa-

list's own country. No journalistic activity is allowed in Cuba without it and those who break it are always expelled and have their equipment seized. Some 140 correspondents are permanently accredited from 35 countries, according to the official website of the Cuban international press centre. Around 1,500 further foreign journalists from about 60 countries are accredited each year for one-off events. These figures are difficult to verify.

“I've been waiting for four months now since I made my application”, said one frustrated Spanish journalist, who wants to work permanently in Havana. “I want to be there if something happens. They play on our nerves. Only the most determined and motivated people become correspondents.” The correspondent for Spanish news agency *EFE* had to wait 11 months for his press visa. Journalists allowed to live in Cuba have to live in apartments made available by the state and at very high prices. Some foreign journalists fear that the authorities will suddenly halt accreditations, particularly in the case of the death of Fidel Castro.

After obtaining a general accreditation, journalists have to pay for permission to cover each separate event, for example the constituent session of the National Assembly or the book fair. Even to do a vox pop, they have to apply for permission from the international press centre, which costs 60-70 dollars. “Sometimes the most harmless requests are refused”, said one correspondent for a major US daily responsible for covering Central America. “They wouldn't let me interview the curator of the Hemingway House for example.” Foreign correspondents came become paranoid. “I am afraid they won't let me come back because of a not very flattering article I wrote last week”, he said. “Also a photographer on the paper spent one week here without official accreditation.” This feeling of persecution is however quite understandable. The Cuban authorities in February 2007 refused to renew the accreditation of *BBC* correspondent Stephen Gibbs, *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, Gary Marx, and of *El Universal* de Mexico, César González-Calero, who had been in post in Havana for several years.

Conclusion and recommendations

The sad fifth anniversary of “black spring” nevertheless brings some good news: independent journalists, who are more numerous, braver and better organised, have not give up the struggle. But Cuban prisons still hold 23 journalists among the some 240 jailed prisoners of conscience. In addition to these visible victims, the Cuban regime has

managed the major achievement of making journalists within the country harmless and inaudible to the Cuban people without resorting to a new wave of arrests or serious physical punishment. Journalists who choose to stay are betting on the still uncertain emergence in the short term of a civil society and on developments within the Castro regime, worn down by the years. Will the 76-year-old Raul Castro give freedom of expression and information a chance?

The release of four dissidents on 15 February 2008, including the journalist Alejandro González Raga, the Cuban government's signing on 27 February 2008, of two UN human rights pacts sends encouraging signals from the Havana regime to the international community. The 13 March announcement of the lifting of restrictions on individual acquisition of computer equipment also represents a very positive step. This apparent move to openness on the part of the Cuban government, which began to be apparent during the top-level handover of power in July 2006, demands to be translated into actions. For this reason, Reporters Without Borders calls for:

- the quick release of the 23 imprisoned journalists. Reporters Without Borders supports nego-

tiations in pursuit of this which have been opened by the Spanish government,

- an end to discrimination, sanctions and harassment suffered by independent journalists and their families.

- an end to the Cuban government's state monopoly on news, broadcast and printing and facilitating of Internet access.

- an end to the accreditation system designed to control the activity of foreign journalists working in Cuba, as well as to limiting public access to foreign publications.

- lifting of US government restrictions on telephone and Internet access that obstruct contacts between the island's citizens and their exiled families, as well as those of independent journalists with their foreign-based media,

- foreign embassies and diplomatic representations, in particular EU member countries should open their doors more to independent journalists. This request is addressed particularly to France, which takes over the rotating presidency of the EU on 1st July 2008.