

Castro's claims of no dissidents in jail rubbish

Cuba

Hannah Strange Havana

The last of a group of 75 Cuban dissidents held since the island's Black Spring crackdown of 2003 finally trickled out of the country's prisons late last month. President Castro, waving them off into exile in Spain, pronounced Cuba free of political prisoners.

The island's dissidents disagree. They say that about 50 prisoners of conscience still languish in Cuban jails — an issue that remains an obstacle to rapprochement between the communist country and the United States after half a century of enmity.

One of those prisoners is Ernesto Borges Pérez, who is 13 years into a 30-year sentence for passing intelligence information to America. Mr Borges Pérez was a highly trained spy who gradually became convinced of the revolution's ills.

"He never received any payment. He did it because he believed it was right," his father, Raúl Borges, said.

Mr Borges's face crumpled when he stared at a black-and-white photo of



Ernesto Borges Pérez is 13 years into a 30-year sentence

his son. "When Raúl Castro says he has released all the political prisoners, that is a lie," he said. "The whole world should know it."

Mr Borges heads the opposition Christian Democratic Union Party in Cuba, itself an imprisonable offence. He could, he said, be jailed for talking to the press. Sitting in a hotel lobby on the outskirts of Havana, he told *The Times*: "Leaving here the political police could detain me and ... I could be sentenced to 20 years for being a mercenary in the service of the empire". Yet he insisted that he was not afraid. "Talking wherever we want, I feel a free man, and the most beautiful thing is to be free".

One man who knows what the inside of a Cuban prison looks like is Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a former government official turned Black Spring dissident. He was one of the first released, in November 2004 on health grounds, and continues to write anti-government



Guillermo Fariñas, winner of the Sakharov Prize, with the dissident Laura Pollan

critiques from his tiny Havana home, where he sits in a rocking chair surrounded by piles of books and papers and has images of his arrest pinned on the walls.

The prison conditions were terrible, he said. "Inedible food, extremely unhygienic conditions, overcrowding, dirty water, cockroaches, flies." Mr Chepe said that he was never beaten in prison but subjected to constant psychological violence, kept in a windowless cell with 24-hour light for almost a year and interrogated in the early hours.

Despite his experience he does not want to leave Cuba and condemns the exile foisted on other prisoners. "I am Cuban," he said. "We didn't start a revolution for this."

It is difficult to persuade Cubans to speak openly about the Government. Street interviews are declined on the basis that "security is watching". Those who do speak do so in whispers in the back seats of cars. Nevertheless the authorities do not harass the foreign press or prevent them from speaking to dissidents. On arrival journalists are cautioned by a government representative that the dissidents are "mercenaries" — marginal radicals in the pay of America with "crazy, insane" views. But they are not off limits.

Mr Castro, under pressure from the Roman Catholic Church and stung by international criticism after the death in February 2010 of the hunger striker Orlando Zapata, is favouring a more hands-off approach than his brother, Fidel.

For all the fears of Mr Borges and others that they could be arrested at any minute, they appear, at least to some extent, to be tolerated.

Most dissidents acknowledge receiving US support. They argue that

the Castro revolution received foreign funding initially. Guillermo Fariñas, a hunger-striking journalist and activist who received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize in October, said: "I don't see it as bad, and I don't need to deny that I receive aid regularly."

The US Government insists that Havana makes further progress on human rights as a precondition for talks towards ending its half-century embargo. A State Department statement said that the prisoner release last month was "a step in the right direction" but that rights remained poor. Cuba must release all remaining

political prisoners and refrain from forcing them into exile, it said.

Dissidents agreed that Washington's tough line was counterproductive. Mr Borges said that if America hoped to persuade the Castro Government to free prisoners such as his son it should, in turn, release the Miami Five — Cuban intelligence agents whose imprisonment in the US a decade ago has become a cause célèbre.

The embargo too, they said, must end — it serves only to prop up the revolution. "It is unjust," Mr Chepe said. "And it just allows them to blame everything on the empire".

Buy one get one half price!

On ALL HP Toner when you buy 2 of the same*

HP Q6000A Black Toner
• 381539 • Individual Price £58.68



2nd pack price*
£29.34

HP Q2612A Black Toner
• 375399 • Individual Price £59.89



2nd pack price*
£29.95

HP CB540A Black Toner
• 395345 • Individual Price £62.25



2nd pack price*
£31.13

HP CB541A Cyan Toner
• 395344 • Individual Price £87.97



2nd pack price*
£43.99

Drug lord's extradition offers unlikely truce for neighbours

Venezuela

Girish Gupta Caracas

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela are finally beginning to thaw, with the unlikely catalyst being one of the world's biggest drug traffickers.

The extradition of the Venezuelan Walid Makled, El Arabe (The Turk), to his home country signifies a blow to the United States, where he is wanted for shipping up to 10 tonnes of cocaine into the US each month.

It was with US help that Colombian authorities arrested Makled on the border with Venezuela in August 2010. However, Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia failed to bow to US pressure for his extradition.

Mr Santos said that Makled will go to Venezuela because he faces charges of murder there. Mr Santos added that President Chávez of Venezuela "asked

first". However, the case is more complex than his words suggest and reveals a warming of relations. Though ideologically opposed, Hugo Chávez and Mr Santos have begun to find common ground since the Colombian leader took power in August last year.

Mr Santos had accused Mr Chávez in the past of attempting to assassinate him. Now he describes him as his "new best friend".

A resumption in bilateral trade between the two countries is the bedrock for better relations after Venezuela froze trade with Colombia.

The animosity has focused primarily on Mr Chávez's support of Colombia's Farc guerrillas. However, Mr Santos recently said that Mr Chávez was helping in the battle against the armed group.

Makled has spent months accusing Venezuela's ruling elite of being involved in cocaine trafficking, prompting fears for his safety when he returns to Venezuela in the coming weeks.

£5 Off

when you spend over £30 in-store**

**Only one voucher per transaction and only one voucher per customer. Not valid with any other voucher offer. No copies/facsimiles, voucher must be surrendered. No cash alternative or credit back. Not valid on prior purchases or exchange items. Voucher valid in Staples UK stores only and not via the Staples Catalogue or Online Shop. Not valid on purchases of gift vouchers, DHL, postage stamps, contract broadband or Staples complete care plans.

Voucher Code: 301352 Valid until 25/04/11

Voucher Must End Monday 25th April

STAPLES®

that was easy.®