

Pope to meet the Castros but shuns Cuban dissidents

Girish Gupta
Havana

WHEN Pope Benedict XVI arrives in Cuba for a two-day visit tomorrow, he will be assured of a respectful welcome from the last bastion of Communism in the Americas despite his call for the island to replace Marxism.

As he flew to start his American visit in Mexico last Friday, Benedict said the Catholic Church was ready to help Cuba find new ways of moving forward "without trauma".

However, he will walk into a row over the church's reluctance to

embrace the dissidents who are challenging the Castro brothers' grip on the island.

Fourteen years after a visit by Pope John Paul II thrilled Cuba's Catholics and promised a new age of religious tolerance, human rights advocates have been saddened by another crackdown on dissenters, who are stunned that Benedict appears to be avoiding them.

From the protesters known as Las Damas de Blanco (the Ladies in White) to former political prisoners and exiled activists, Cuba's opposition had been looking forward to the visit as a chance to highlight resist-

ance to 85-year-old Fidel Castro, and the slow pace of change introduced by his younger brother, Raul, who became president in 2008.

Told of the Pope's comments, Bruno Rodriguez, Cuba's foreign minister, said: "We will listen with all respect to His Holiness." Yet Cuba's determination to turn the visit into a propaganda boost has raised awkward questions about the church's relations with the regime.

After a wave of arrests aroused international indignation last week, several dissidents said they had been warned to stay away from papal ceremonies. "The government

is preparing a grand theatre," said Oswaldo Paya, an activist once nominated for the Nobel peace prize. "State security is visiting dissidents to prevent them from going to see the Pope," he added.

Berta Soler, leader of the Ladies in White, said at least 70 members of her group, which protests on behalf of political prisoners, had been arrested. All were later released, but Soler said she had been horrified to learn that the 84-year-old Pope might meet Fidel Castro — whose health is uncertain — but did not have time to meet activists.

"We only want one minute to

communicate with him," Soler said. "We are marginalised, oppressed and the church must hear and protect us."

Foreign activists joined the outcry, among them Lech Walesa, the former Polish president, who wrote: "I implore Your Holiness to defend prisoners of conscience."

The Castro regime has dismissed the fuss as "subversive efforts" by "tiny counter-revolutionary groups... funded by the Miami anti-Cuba mafia". The Communist party paper, Granma, dismissed the Ladies in White as "mercenaries of the empire" [America].

Vatican officials rejected accusations that Benedict was falling into a propaganda trap.

Activists agree that the church has become a force in a state that once declared itself atheist, but question the Vatican's caution. Earlier this month, 13 opposition figures occupied a Havana church. The island's cardinal, Jaime Ortega, called in police to evict them.

Ortega has been praised for building bridges to Raul Castro and other reform-minded officials but his reluctance to confront the regime has left some wondering whose side he is on. He led prayers

for Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan strongman who has been treated for cancer in Havana, but resisted calls for services honouring dissidents.

Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Havana-born chairwoman of the House foreign affairs committee in Washington, described the crackdown as "shameful" and urged the church "to publicly support peaceful opposition, and not deny them sanctuary".

The Pope is expected to draw at least 350,000 people to an outdoor mass in Mexico City today and speak out against the country's drug war, which has killed 47,000 people.

Mark Franchetti
Moscow

A RUSSIAN female punk band has blamed president-elect Vladimir Putin for the detention of three women alleged to be band members and a police hunt for four others.

Speaking with their faces covered by brightly coloured balaclavas — part of the "uniform" they adopt for performances — the four members of Pussy Riot who still remain at large said they had no doubt that "Putin and his entourage" were behind the heavy-handed repression.

The band is part of an opposition "co-operative" that has angered the authorities. A dozen heavily armed police officers arrested two women this month and charged them with hooliganism after the group sang an anti-Kremlin song, including an appeal to the Virgin Mary to "chase Putin out", at the altar of Moscow's principal cathedral. The stunt was deemed obscene by the authorities.

Maria Alyokhina, 23, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22, both mothers of young children, are being held on remand and face up to seven years in jail if found guilty. Both deny being members of Pussy Riot.

Police later arrested a third band member. She also says she is innocent.

Putin, who in elections this month won a third term as president, has condemned the church stunt as "unpleasant for all believers".

One of the band members said: "Many churchgoers are appalled that three young mothers should be in jail



Putin slams hammer down on punk girl rebels



Pussy Riot's protests have angered Vladimir Putin, far left

over a tune sung in a church."

A supporter of the group said: "The state's reaction is completely over the top. Locking up young mothers and denying them bail, hunting down the others, this is the kind of treatment fit for terrorists, not for a group of girls who simply staged a provocative stunt."

Pussy Riot came to worldwide attention two months ago when members staged a performance on Red Square in

protest at Putin's election campaign. A video in which the masked girls waved smoke flares and sang a protest song under the Kremlin walls went viral on the internet.

The cathedral stunt was filmed by other members of the co-operative who shoot and edit the band's videos and post them on the internet.

Footage shows five members of Pussy Riot dancing and singing at the altar of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral as church

staff try to stop them. The church is the one attended by Putin at Christmas and Easter.

The band's "punk prayer" was aimed at Putin and the Orthodox Church's close links to the Kremlin. One of the songs includes the line: "The KGB chief" — a reference to Putin's career in the Soviet-era secret police — "is their chief saint. He leads protesters to prison in a convoy."

The stunt has divided opinion in the church with

some priests calling for a harsh punishment and others for leniency.

The authorities' response has raised fears that Putin's Kremlin intends to harden its response to Russia's opposition, which in recent months has staged the largest street protests in 20 years.

Despite promises to ease restrictions on political parties which do not support the Kremlin, the authorities again refused to register Parnas, the

country's only real opposition party.

In a further sign of a tough line by the authorities, Alexei Kozlov, the businessman husband of Olga Romanova, a journalist and prominent opposition figure, was returned to jail after a court had ordered him to be released.

Kozlov, 37, who was serving a seven-year sentence on embezzlement charges, won a landmark victory and was released after three years in

prison. But the prosecutors went back to court and had him jailed for two more years.

Many of Kozlov's supporters suspect the campaign against him is an attempt to put pressure on Romanova. Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Soviet leader, has expressed his support for Kozlov.

"I really thought this nightmare was over. Psychologically it's very hard indeed to face going back," said Kozlov in an interview less than two days

before he was handcuffed in court and returned to jail.

Hundreds of supporters shouting "Pozor!" ("Shame on you!") gathered outside the courthouse, where the presence of armed police with dogs intimidated protesters.

"Those who jailed me the first time are again coming after me because a corrupt system like this cannot concede that it made a mistake — it must fight back to survive," the businessman said.

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