



Written by [Mary McHugh](#) on July 15, 2010

Seven Released Cuban Political Prisoners Arrive in Spain

On Tuesday, July 13, the first seven of what is expected to be up to 52 political prisoners released from Cuba, arrived in Madrid, Spain, with family members on two commercial flights. Of the prisoners to be released, 20 have so far expressed desire that Spain be their place of exile.

Both Chile and the United States have also offered them asylum. Spanish officials say those arriving there are not required to stay in the country and are free to move elsewhere. Late on Monday, the released prisoners were reunited with their wives and children. After being interviewed one by one at the airport, Spanish consular officials granted visas. One of those released, Omar Ruiz, told the Associated Press in a phone call from the Havana airport, "I won't consider myself free until I arrive in Spain." Ruiz related that he and six other inmates were driven to Havana airport and were reunited with their relatives in a special waiting room. He had been serving a 12-year term for treason.



The first flight, an Air Europa jet, arrived at Barajas Airport in Madrid at 12:49 local time, carrying Lester Gonzalez, Antonio Villarreal, Julio Cesar Galvez, Jose Luis Garcia Paneque, Pablo Pacheco and Ruiz. An Iberian flight arrived about an hour and a half later, with [Ricardo Gonzalez](#) and his family. [Paneque](#) had called as his plane was departing for Madrid. Commenting about this new freedom he said, "You can imagine how a man in prison for seven years, including 17 months in solitary, must feel." In a Thursday press conference, 66-year-old journalist Julio Cesar Galvez related that "the hygiene and health situations in prisons throughout the island of Cuba are not terrible, they are worse than terrible.... We had to live with rats and cockroaches...with excrement. It's not a lie." He added that there were outbreaks of dengue and tuberculosis in prison. Galvez had been sentenced to 15 years.

According to the AP:

He (Galvez) said that in the prison of Villa Clara there were more than 1,500 inmates with up to 40 prisoners in cells measuring 3 square meters (32 sq. feet).

Normando Hernandez, 40, another journalist who was freed, said prisoners were so desperate they caused themselves injuries.

"The prisoners are tired of demanding their rights," he said, "Deaf ears to every type of complaint makes these people lose hope, the desire to live and they end up injuring themselves,



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and trying to take their lives.”

“I saw people stick needles in the dark part of their eye,” said Hernandez. “I’ve seen prisoners roll themselves in foam mattresses and set themselves alight, prisoners who inject excrement and urine into their eyes, prisoners who inject petrol into their private parts and other places just so they will be attended to.”

Hernandez was sentenced to 25 years.

In the hours before their departure, relatives had been told to prepare to leave Cuba at a moment’s notice. Mr. Gonzalez read a statement at the Madrid airport on behalf of the group, saying, “For us, exile is an extension of our fight and you can fight in many ways. We have total faith in words, in dialogue and extraordinary faith that change is inevitable.”

These freed prisoners were part of arrests made in a 2003 crackdown known as “The Black Spring” when, according to the account in [Wikipedia](#), “the Cuban government arrested and summarily tried and sentenced 75 human rights defenders, independent journalists, and independent librarians to terms of up to 28 years in prison.”

Said an AP report, “The Cuban government has long maintained that none of them is a prisoner of conscience. It insists they are mercenaries paid by Washington and supported by anti-Castro exiles in Miami, whose only goal was to discredit the Cuban government. Many of the Web sites the journalists had worked for were maintained by exiles outside Cuba.”

A Reuters account examined what stimulated the events leading to the freeing of these Cuban prisoners, saying that the death last February of the jailed dissident hunger striker Orlando Zapata, and the resulting criticism of Cuba which followed worldwide, was a beginning.

A July 9 article in *The New American* online by Warren Mass, “[Cuba Releasing 52 Political Prisoners](#),” also recounted developments, including last week’s final one when, “Following a meeting on July 7 between Cuban President Raul Castro and Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, the diocesan office released an announcement that the Cuban government has agreed to set free 52 political prisoners and allow them to leave the country.”

One [BBC](#) report relates that at least three prisoners have told the Church they elect to stay in Cuba, according to Elizardo Sanchez who is head of the unofficial Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCHRNR). The Cubans now in Madrid have stated they were only allowed the choice of either staying in prison or going to Spain.

[Not everyone](#) hailed the prisoners’ release. In Miami, Florida, Ninoska Perez Castellon, a host on Spanish-language exile broadcast Radio Mambi, spoke for many when he said the freeing of these dissidents was merely a ploy to have sanctions against Cuba lifted, stating, “The liberation of the political prisoners doesn’t represent anything. They have done it on multiple occasions and the jails have continued filling up. It’s not a liberation, it’s basically sending them to exile.” He is also on the board of the exile group Cuban Liberty Council, which opposes Fidel Castro and the Cuban government.

Said the AP:

In Spain, the prisoners are being cared for by three social worker groups and being put up in a modest hotel in Madrid used mainly by immigrants while their final status and destination is decided.

“We’re in a legal limbo,” said Galvez, adding that Cuba had made it clear they would need



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permits to return. "If we're not free, we are refugees."

?Spain has said they will be given immigrant status with residence and work that will would allow them to travel freely. On Thursday, the Cubans said they had been told they could apply for political asylum.

Photo: Cuban dissidents who were released from jail in Cuba, and "Ladies in White" supporters at a news conference in Madrid on July 15, 2010: AP Images



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