

# Independent Libraries in Cuba

Annex 1: Background information on the Independent Libraries Project

Annex 2: The official response from the Library Association of Cuba (ASCUBI)

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## The Case: Situation and status

The Independent Libraries in Cuba Project was initiated in February 1998. The term "independent" distinguishes those libraries from the official library system of Cuba, which is operated by the Government of Cuba.

At the International Book Fair, celebrated in Havana in February of 1998, Fidel Castro stated that: *"In Cuba there are no prohibited books, only those we do not have the money to buy"*. Berta del Carmen Mexidor Vázquez, an economist in the province of Tunas, saw this statement as an opportunity to create independent libraries. Libraries, which would grant the possibility of having *"access to books, magazines, documents and other publications to which there is no access in state institutions because they were being considered enemy propaganda and stereotyped as a crime against the powers of the state"*.

The principal objectives of the independent libraries were to open *"a neutral enlightening space, dedicated to literature, debate, the investigation and analysis of diverse materials, and to expand the cultural and investigative horizons of all interested people"*. And it was hoped that: *"These libraries will offer more room in the supposed flexibility granted by Mr. Castro in the areas of reading, debate, research and analysis of diverse materials, that would broaden the cultural and investigative horizons of all the people, who could become interested in such project"*.

The principal intention in creating the Independent Libraries consists, according to its founders, *"to promote reading not as a mere act of receiving understanding, but to form an opinion which is individually arrived at without censorship nor obligation to one belief."* The objective is within the existing Cuban legal framework to create permanent institutions that promote a revitalisation of the growing civil society.

The project was realised with the foundation of the first independent library on March 13, 1998 in Las Tunas, under the supervision of Berta Mexidor. Within 9 months the number of independent libraries increased from 1 to 13. Today there are 18 independent libraries functioning throughout Cuba, located in the areas of Las Tunas, Santiago de Cuba, Pinar del Río, Havana, Granma and Guantánamo.

The participants are intellectuals (professors, technicians, and doctors) or artists, many of who have suffered arrests and have been expelled, from their previous positions because of their ideas and political views. Most of them are activists related to various opposition groups or parties, e.g. the Democratic Solidarity Party and the Cuban Party of Orthodox Renovation.

The founders and participants of the library project reveal this information freely and openly. All names and personal data are accessible on the Miami-based website of CubaNet. The founders also describe their initiative as an act of opposition to the State policies on access to information and freedom of expression: *"Born of an initiative of Cuban civil society this project represents a new form of resistance facing the monolithic will of the government. It constitutes a clear demonstration of the popular will to create neutral spaces, without ideologies, where one can define the cultural formation of a person"*. But the project does not violate any Cuban laws or dispositions by the government.

The founders claim that the libraries are sheltered within the legal framework of a cultural initiative for the benefit of the people, and that all requirements to be registered under the National Register of Associations are fulfilled.

Due to the lack of funding, the project is dependent on people and institutions that may be interested in the donation of materials and funds for the purchase of materials, office supplies and any other goods necessary for its development.

Following organisations within Cuba supports the initiative: Agencia de Prensa Libertad. Las Tunas, Partido Solidaridad Democrática, Partido Cubano de Renovación Ortodoxa, Agencia de Prensa Libre Oriental, Buró de Prensa Independiente de Cuba and Agencia de Noticias Cubapress. And represented abroad by Centro de Estudios para una Opción Nacional, CEON, (<http://www.directorio.org>).

## Problem / Issue

The Government of Cuba has responded to the independent libraries with a campaign of threats, intimidation,

harassment, eviction, short-term arrests, and the confiscation of their incoming book donations or book collections. Some examples of the incidents reported:

- The State Security police arrested Berta Mexidor on May 19 1999. She was detained for two hours before being released with a warning to cease her activities. Among the other librarians arrested in recent months are Manuel Jerez of Granma Province and Rolando Bestart of the city of Santiago.
- The independent Frank Pais Garcia Library in Santiago, which specialises in after-school programs for children, has had its book collection confiscated. State Security police has issued warnings to the parents of children, who visit the library.
- Unidentified men dressed in civilian clothes have repeatedly threatened the librarian of the independent Frank Pais Garcia Library, Alfredo Dennis Camps, on the street.
- Since mid-May large numbers of people has periodically besieged Mirna Riveron, the director of an independent library in the city of Santiago, and her family in an effort to intimidate them. Included among these groups, organized by the government, are young men in uniform who fire volleys of gunfire in the air outside her house.
- On August 23 1999 the State Security police raided the home of Ramon Colas and Berta Mexidor, the founders of Cuba's independent library movement. The two, who are a married couple, and their two children were evicted from their home, which doubles as the location of the independent Felix Varela Library. In the course of the eviction Ramon Colas was arrested, when he protested the eviction of his family and their forced relocation to a remote village on a military farm, but was released after being detained overnight. The State Security police seized some papers belonging to the couple, but they were unable to find the book collection of the independent Felix Varela Library, which had apparently been dispersed among friends and supporters before the eviction.
- On August 25 three men in a black car appeared at the house of neighbours of Ramon Colas and Berta Mexidor, who had offered to safeguard some of their belongings - clothing and some papers. They men said they were from the Church and had been sent at the request of the Church and at the request of the family. They deceived the neighbours and confiscated family photographs, other papers and press releases of the independent Libertad Press Agency of which Mexidor is a correspondent. They also seized documents relating to the Independent Library Project.

#### **IFLA/FAIFE initiatives**

The case of harassment of the Independent Libraries in Cuba was presented to the IFLA/FAIFE Chair and Office by e-mail on June 18 1999 through an American based organisation called *Friends of Cuban Libraries* (FCL). This organisation on June 8 launched a campaign to oppose what it terms "*the systematic intimidation and arrest of independent librarians in Cuba and the seizure of their book collections*".

Information on the campaign was forwarded to Ms Marta Terry, the Cuban member of the IFLA/FAIFE Committee and Chair of *ASCUBI*, the Cuban Library Association, for consultation. On the June 23 she reported back that she had no knowledge of such incidents and knew nothing of the organisation (FCL). She added a word of warning that IFLA/FAIFE must be aware of people who would try to take advantage of the organization for their own personal interests. She noted that the ASCUBI executive board would discuss the matter on their next meeting and send an official reply.

The Office also contacted Robert Kent, who was the source of the initial information and co-founder of FCL. Robert Kent directed the Office to some background information found on the CubaNet website (<http://www.cubanet.org/bibliotecas/proyecto.htm>). The site contained a report in Spanish written by Berta Mexidor. The report includes an introductory description of the Independent Libraries Project and all the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the independent librarians. Through Rosa Berre, editor of CubaNet, the IFLA/FAIFE Office on August 9 received an updated English version of the background information found on CubaNet (see Annex 1).

The initiative from FCL was shortly followed by an intense debate on various mailing lists concerning the nature of the initiative and the current library situation in Cuba. Especially active was the *Cuban Libraries Support Group* (CLSG), established on 1 July 1999, to support Cuban libraries, librarians, library and information workers and the Cuban Library Association (ASCUBI). The CLSG claimed that FCL, the Independent Libraries Project and CubaNet are funded by various agencies and organisations related to the American government and dissident Cubans in Miami and solely aiming to overthrow the present Cuban Government.

In the end of June the IFLA/FAIFE Office contacted representatives of the Independent Libraries directly by phone and using a Spanish-speaking interpreter. These contacts have been repeated several times in June, August and September. The talks have confirmed the situation including the series of incidents reported by FCL and CubaNet. In fact CubaNet is the only line of communication for information in print to the world outside available to the Independent Libraries as access to both fax and e-mail is very restricted in Cuba.

On the August 19 IFLA/FAIFE received the official response from the Library Association of Cuba (ASCUBI) from Ms. Marta Terry (see Annex 2). The issue has been on the agenda of the board at a meeting in Havana August 1999. The reply only refers to the specific incidents in two short passages:

- "*Marta Terry (Chair) reported that she and other members of the Executive Board of ASCUBI conducted an inquiry on the issues put forward by the press release (political troubles for Cuban librarians), as well as on the very*

*existence of the libraries referred to, since we had no information on them at all, and the persons mentioned in the press release had no contact with ASCUBI or the profession at large in Cuba".*

- *"Contacts with the authorities concerned resulted in the confirmation that the persons mentioned in the press release were never subject to arrest or imprisonment."*

The remainder of the letter is a description of the condition of libraries, literacy and education in Cuba with no special reference to intellectual freedom issues.

Nevertheless the general situation regarding the independent libraries in Cuba and the incidents reported by FCL and CubaNet have been confirmed by the IFLA/FAIFE investigations on Cuba by the people concerned.

### **General IF situation in Cuba**

To complement the information on the specific Cuban incidents the Office has collected some more general information from human rights organisations.

- *"It was estimated that at least 350 political prisoners who had been convicted of state security offences, many after unfair trials, remained imprisoned at the end of the year, including at least 60 prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience. However, the exact figure was not known because of the absence of official data and the continuing severe restrictions on human rights monitoring.*

*Several members of unofficial groups working in the field of civil and political rights, journalists working for independent press agencies, and human rights activists, were detained for short periods; most were released without charge. Many were subjected to other forms of intimidation, including being refused permission to leave the country with the right to return, and actos de repudio (acts of repudiation) organized by government officials, which involved being verbally abused and sometimes physically assaulted by government supporters... Trials in political cases again fell far short of international standards of fairness. Defendants in cases heard by municipal courts, often only hours or days after arrest sometimes had no legal representation. Detainees held under investigation on state security charges often had very limited access to lawyers while in pre-trial detention at police stations or at State Security headquarters and were sometimes subjected to psychological pressure, such as solitary confinement, long intense interrogations, threats and insults".*

Amnesty International Report 1999

*"Cuban laws allowed the government to silence opponents under a veil of legality. The government rejected pleas to repeal offensive provisions such as the crime of enemy propaganda and spreading false news, which criminalized dissent and independent reporting. Cuban law broadly defined sedition as including non-violent opposition that 'perturb[ed] the socialist order'. Cuba's laws against insulting public figures, mass organizations, and dead heroes also sweepingly denied freedom of speech."*

Human Rights Watch World Report 1999

- *"Fidel Castro's Communist regime and its intelligence apparatus, the State Security Agency, continue to clamp down on Cuban journalists attempting to report independently on developments in the country. The authorities routinely harass, threaten, arrest and imprison journalists, often with a goal of "persuading" them into leaving the country."*

1998 World Press Freedom Review

- *"Cuba is still the only country in the Americas where there is no freedom for the press... After a lull following the Pope's visit in January 1998, repression of the unofficial press began again, with journalists threatened with imprisonment, forced to move house, or subjected to public denunciation. Arrests have become increasingly systematic."*

1999 Annual Report - Reporters sans frontières

All reports indicate that the Cuban government systematically uses censorship, intimidation and harassment as a means to suppress opponents rather than trials and imprisonment.

### **Evaluation and actions**

A dissident group, encouraged and probably also partly financed by foreign interests, has established some amateur libraries to challenge the current government of Cuba in regard to intellectual freedom. The external support group, the Friends of Cuban Libraries, have claimed that the Government has attempted to intimidate the operators of the libraries. Most information has come through the FCL and CubaNet allegedly because of a fear that the operators or other internal sources will be persecuted and due to Government control of means of communication such as e-mail and fax.

ASCUBI, the national library association, has confirmed the existence of the libraries. It advises that the operators according to Cuban authorities have neither been arrested nor imprisoned, but doesn't address the issue of intimidation. It

argues that the Government of Cuba has sponsored tremendous developments of libraries, literacy, reading etc despite very difficult economic circumstances. However, it does not comment on the issue of intellectual freedom.

IFLA does not oppose any government, including the Government of Cuba, nor does it endorse any group opposed to a government. IFLA recognises the considerable achievements in regard to libraries and literacy achieved in Cuba since 1959, which were demonstrated to participants in the 1994 IFLA Conference in Havana. However, IFLA strongly upholds intellectual freedom and the right of all peoples to free access to information and freedom of expression. Consequently, IFLA supports the right of any citizen of a country to make available information without fear of intimidation or repression.

The IFLA/FAIFE Chair and Office therefore has decided to:

- Publicise the report on the Independent Libraries in Cuba and disseminates it to relevant organisations within the field of human rights and intellectual freedom.
- Present a letter to the Cuban government stating that IFLA / FAIFE:
  - Recognises the advancements achieved in Cuba concerning the development of libraries, the general rate of literacy, the level of education, and
  - recognises the present difficult political and economic circumstances of Cuba, but
  - urges the Cuban government to respect the basic principles of Intellectual Freedom and to put an end to the intimidation of the Independent Libraries in Cuba, and furthermore
  - urges the Cuban government, the Cuban libraries and librarians to adhere to the principles of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as defined in the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom.
- Urge other concerned parties to send appeals on this matter to the President of Cuba at the following address:

Mr. Fidel Castro Ruz  
President of Cuba  
c/o United Nations Mission  
New York, NY 10016,  
United States  
Fax: +1 212 779 1697