

IFLA/FAIFE

REPORT ON CUBA / AUGUST 2001

Libraries in Cuba

An IFLA/FAIFE Report on Free Access to Information in Cuba

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"If you ask Cuban librarians about human rights in regard to free access to information and freedom of expression they will understand the issue the same way as you do but we are looking at these rights from another standpoint. However, at the bottom line these stand points will not be that different"

Marta Terry, President of ASCUBI

May 2001

Introduction

In connection with the ACURIL Conference 2001 IFLA Secretary General Mr Ross Shimmon and IFLA/FAIFE Office Director Ms Susanne Seidelin visited Cuba 23 - 31 May on a mission to investigate the situation regarding free access to information in Cuban libraries and to follow up on the status of the independent libraries.

Since the publication of the first IFLA/FAIFE report on the independent libraries several incidents of harassment and confiscations of books have been reported along with instances of restricted access to specific titles and works in Cuban libraries. To follow up on these matters and in order to more thoroughly discuss the development of library services in Cuba in connection with free access to information IFLA/FAIFE has decided to organise a panel discussion on Cuban libraries at the IFLA Conference in Boston, August 2001. We hope the outcome of this meeting will inspire future initiatives and cooperation in regard to the development of library services in Cuba.

The visit to Havana presented excellent opportunities to engage in a constructive and open dialogue with Cuban government representatives and colleagues representing both the official and the alternative library community. During our stay, five independent libraries within the Havana region were visited and several meetings with professionals were held.

This report will provide an overview of the situation in regard to free access to information in Cuban libraries, censorship and the development of library services. The present situation concerning the independent libraries will be described against the background of interviews and visits to the sites. The economic effects of the US embargo on the capacity of Cuban libraries to purchase information materials and related technologies will be discussed. Finally, the report will suggest initiatives supporting the work of safeguarding free access to information in Cuban libraries for

discussion within the FAIFE Committee.

The various reports from our visit to Cuba are available at: www.ifla.org, www.ifla.org/faife/, www.ala.org

Background

The first IFLA/FAIFE report on Cuba was published in September 1999. It describes the background of the independent libraries initiative and the situation of those libraries at the time, as it was presented to IFLA/FAIFE. The information and conclusions of the report were based on the outcome of FAIFE Office investigations in Cuba, telephone interviews with representatives of the independent libraries during June, August and September 1999, information obtained from CubaNet and contacts with Mr Robert Kent who represented the Friends of Cuban Libraries (FCL). Two annexes were attached: background information on the Independent Library Project and the official response from the Library Association of Cuba, ASCUBI. The report concluded that, contrary to the results of investigations conducted by ASCUBI, the general situation regarding the independent libraries in Cuba - as reported by FCL and CubaNet - was confirmed by the investigations of IFLA/FAIFE and the people concerned. The incidents of arrests and harassment of independent librarians and the confiscations of books were also confirmed. To complement this conclusion, general information on the situation in Cuba was collected from human rights organisations' reports eg Amnesty International Report, Human Rights Watch World Report, and Annual Report - Reporters sans Frontiers. These reports concurrently indicated that the Cuban government systematically employed censorship, intimidation and harassment as a method to suppress opponents rather than trials and imprisonment. The Cuban library community, as represented by ASCUBI, has criticized the first IFLA/FAIFE report for taking a one sided and unbalanced stand and for ignoring the achievements of the official libraries of Cuba.

Objectives of the delegations

Since the publication of the report in 1999, the issue of free access to information and freedom of expression in Cuba has been discussed at length within the international library community. The Friends of Cuban Libraries and CubaNet have systematically distributed reports on specific cases of censorship and incidents in regard to the independent libraries.

The major objectives of the visit to Havana were to get a first-hand impression of the mission and developments within the independent library movement and to engage in a constructive and open dialogue with the professional library community in order to seek cooperation and, as far as possible, a mutual understanding of the value of free access to information. Visiting both public libraries and the National Library, José Martí, made it possible to get a more realistic and balanced picture of library services in Cuba. This approach had been missing, to some extent, in a debate which concentrated primarily on the difficulties faced by the independent libraries. The delegation was also able to investigate, at least to some extent, the allegations concerning banned books in the libraries we visited.

At the time of our visit, a delegation from the American Library Association (ALA) was

also visiting Cuba. ALA was represented by: Mr John W Berry, incoming president of the ALA; Ms Barbara Ford, a former president of ALA and member of the International Relations Committee (IRC); Ms Patricia Wand, chair of the IRC Subcommittee on Latin America and the Caribbean; Ms Nancy John, incoming chair and member of the International Relations Committee; and Ms Alice Calabrese, member of the ALA Executive Board.

In view of the shared interests of the two delegations, we decided to share our resources by working together during the stay, although our objectives were not identical. Both Patricia Wand and Barbara Ford are fluent Spanish speakers which was a great help to both delegations. The cooperation proved to be very positive and productive and we functioned splendidly as a team. No doubt the results of the visit would have been less satisfactory had we operated separately.

The detailed program of visits is listed at the end of this report. At our last visit to a independent library, the IFLA/FAIFE delegation was accompanied by: Mr Winston Tabb, Director of Library Services, Library of Congress; Mr David Owen, Share the Vision; Mr Francisco Javier Martínez Calvo, ONCE; and Mr Stuart Hamilton, Brighton Public Library, UK who is investigating the independent libraries for his MA at the Department of Archive and Information Studies at London University.

Public library services in Cuba

Introduction

For this visit our hosts had designed an extensive four-day programme of meetings and visits to libraries as an introduction to professional library services and key collaborative organisations. Discussions were arranged with the Executive Board of the Cuban Association of Librarians (ASCUBI) and representatives of several organisations and bodies such as: the Institute of Documentation and Scientific Technical Information (IDICT); Cuban Scientific Technical Society (SOCIT); Cuban Artists and Writers Union Publishing Council (UNEAC); Superior Art Institute (ISA); Ministry of Culture (MINCULT, Vice-Minister Mr Ismael González); The Book Institute, Instituto Cubano del Libro; Cuban Book Friendship Society (SCAL). Finally, a two-hour meeting was held with the President of National Assembly.

Access to information

Book production

Cuba is a nation of readers and access to information in print as well as in electronic forms is a high priority issue. The libraries are busy and a variety of books are available at the street markets. The latter are mostly old, including books in English, French and German. The literacy programme launched by Fidel Castro and announced in the UN emphasized the priority of literacy and reading. Both then and today Cuba's literacy figures are among the highest in the Latin America countries. Cuban books were formerly published in great numbers - a circumstance made possible by the import of paper from the former Soviet Union. The financial support from USSR was withdrawn in 1991, the subsequent paper shortage led to a market decrease in book production, in both numbers of titles and copies. Over the last couple of years, however, the situation has become less difficult. The printing industry is now recovering: in 2000 a total of 1,261 book titles were published in 9,837,300 copies.

Cuban initiatives to further access to information

To support publication of local writers, new simple, digital printing facilities have been established at regional and municipal levels. They are linked in a network that allows for the same title to be produced simultaneously in all regions and thus improves access to literature in general. The selection of titles is said to depend only on the literary quality of the individual work. With a publishing goal of 250 titles per province, per annum, a total of 250 titles have been produced during the first four months of 2001. The books will be simultaneously presented at book fairs in 17 cities, including the Havana Book Fair.

October 2000 saw the launch of a new television programme *University for All*. So far it has offered ten different courses, including an English course which is intended to widen the possibilities of reading books in English for everybody. To further increase cultural opportunities at the local level, the Ministry of Culture introduced the *Ten Basic Cultural Institutions* programme in 1982, establishing in each municipality one of the following institutions or initiatives: library; cultural centre; museum; art gallery; music band; choir; cinema; drama group; or handicraft shop.

Minerva Book Clubs

Three years ago the National Library launched the Minerva programme to provide more books to readers. By help of fees (membership, per loan and overdue) members of the club partly pay for the acquisition of new titles or for additional copies of existing titles. Both new and older books by Cuban and foreign writers are available. The fees are low compared to Western standards but considering the generally very low incomes in Cuba, it may be expected that only those with an income above average or highly motivated readers could afford membership. However, the initiative is very popular and though it is still at an experimental stage 26 libraries offer the service. It will be extended to all public libraries should it prove successful by the end of the testing period.

Banned Books

The delegations have been informed by different sources that many internationally well-known and respected authors do not have their works represented in Cuban libraries, or that, if they have, their works are stocked in closed areas with limited access only for those who have obtained special permits. Examples of works by both Cuban and foreign writers have been listed by Mr Robert Kent, FCL, who also advised us that these books are not necessarily available to readers though they are listed in catalogues. When visiting the libraries we, therefore, as far as possible, checked both in card catalogues and on the shelves. In some instances the books could not be found or were on loan, while in others we saw the books.

Availability of the works of the following writers was investigated:

- Reinaldo Areñas - only represented at the National Library to be read on spot.
- Lino Novas Calvo - one title at the National Library
- Maria Elena Varela Cruz - no titles found Jesus Diaz - eight titles at the National Library and in another library
- Vaclav Havel - no titles found
- Guillermo Cabrera Infante - three titles at the National Library and in another library
- Mario Vargas Llosa - five titles in two libraries
- Carlos Alberto Montaner - no titles found

- George Orwell - three titles at the National Library, were on loan to the director as he was working on an Orwell essay.
- Lesandro Otero - one title at the National Library
- Heberto Padilla - two titles in two different libraries
- Octavio Paz - complete works at the National Library; two titles and a poem collection in another library
- Zoe Valdes - four titles at the National Library, two titles in another library: one on loan the other on request

It should be mentioned that the titles that are only available in one copy are always kept in closed shelves and must be read at the library a practice well known in libraries all over the world. Furthermore, when one evaluates the practice of Cuban libraries, both the poor condition of most books and the shortage of funding should be taken into account.

When discussing the issue of banned books with key figures of the Cuban Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC), it was indicated that for copyright reasons Infante, Manach and Areñas do not want their works published in Cuba. They also said that the alleged unavailability of Orwell's works is a myth on the contrary, the National Library is preparing an Orwell exhibition this year. The UNEAC magazine Union publishes articles on Cuban writers living abroad on a regular basis (we saw a few examples of such articles) and the Union is working on an anthology on some of these writers. Marta Terry, ASCUBI, put it this way: "As long as the writer is Cuban he belongs to the Cuban literature".

When visiting the independent libraries we told their keepers about the book list and our results. They responded that visitors from abroad could get access to books that were unavailable to the public. They also noted that there had been no mention in the Cuban Press of Infante winning a Spanish book prize and that the works of Dulce Maria Loynaz had been removed from the libraries because of her critical opinions. However, after her death she had been published again. Statistics were mentioned as an example of the lack of free access.

More books are welcome

To quote the Director of the National Library, "We believe that people should have access to foreign literature at length". When asked whether donations of books would be accepted he said "they are welcome as long as our institutions are respected" and they could be given "to libraries or single persons without restrictions". Librarians in other libraries we visited also said they would accept donations of foreign writers, including those the delegates had checked.

The Cuban library system

The library system of Cuba is well linked and organised. The total number of public libraries is 391, of which the oldest dates back 160 years. The number is equivalent to one library per half a million inhabitants. During the period 1980-1991 many new libraries opened and others were re-constructed but the withdrawal of economic support from the Soviet Union put an end to these initiatives. Over the last two years, however, a library renovation programme has been launched and at present 16 libraries are under renovation and 12 new libraries are under construction.

The system is composed of:

- the National Library, José Martí
- university libraries
- a provincial library in each of the 14 provinces
- county libraries with branches
- public libraries in the 169 municipalities
- special libraries
- school libraries

The system is linked by a close cooperation between the National Library and the 14 provincial libraries and by different degrees of cooperation between the county and public libraries and among the public libraries themselves. The locally founded municipal libraries can also be linked to the county libraries with branches. Each year the leaders of the cultural department in each municipality meet with the Minister of Culture.

In 1999 the Cuban libraries had 6,501,700 library users and provided 9,697,800 loans and other services.

Education

The University of Havana runs a five-year programme for a degree in librarianship. At present 300 students are registered of whom 65 are MA students. They take both general and special courses, eg, information management and processing, and technology. A PhD in library and information science can be obtained by research and may lead to a position outside the libraries as well. The university also offers postgraduate and correspondence courses.

At the 40-years old national school, a two-and-a-half-year educational programme for library technicians or assistants is set up to safeguard professional standards in the most remote parts of the country. The programme includes human science and, computer training, including Internet searching and workshops on the promotion of reading. The school also offers correspondence courses and courses for booksellers and archivists. In addition, the Ministry of Education runs a training school for school librarians.

ASCUBI

The Library Association of Cuba, ASCUBI, was founded in 1981 and has been member of IFLA since 1982. The organisation has an Executive Board, which serves under the National Council. The members are: President Ms Marta Terry, two vice-presidents, two speakers and two top executives elected for four years at the Congress - the highest decision making body. Members total approximately 1100. ASCUBI has nine branches with six more under way, each of which are represented at the National Council, the governing board of ASCUBI.

To keep up with professional librarianship, ASCUBI would welcome donations of library science literature in Spanish. An ASCUBI employee spends 8 to 10 hours a week looking up matters of professional interest on the Internet and this information is then distributed to members.

When delegates brought up the subject, ASCUBI expressed interest in developing a code of ethics for the library profession.

Visits to public libraries

The delegation visited eight libraries in Havana: the National Library, a provincial library, five municipal libraries and a special library. In each library we were received with great hospitality and our Cuban colleagues talked about their work with enthusiasm and answered our questions readily. The delegates engaged in lengthy discussions and exchange of information with directors and staff members during the visits to the following libraries:

The José Martí National Library

The Library is an institution under the Ministry of Culture and was founded on 18 October 1901 by order of the American military governor. It functions as both the National Library and as the head of the public library system. The Library has its own budget and can decide on all library matters. The Library has an agreement of exchange of materials with around 200 organisations abroad, including the Library of Congress: the works of Areñas were mentioned as an example. The Library receives book donations, mostly from Spanish-speaking countries. The Spanish Collection can only be used at the Library. The Collection is comprised of both old materials from before the Revolution, including private collections, and new materials. The Library also organises the circulation of books of foreign writers. The existence of the book preservation department underlines concerns about the physical state of most books in Cuban libraries but it is not sufficiently well funded to save all the books that need preservation.

Ruben Martinez Viellena, Havana Vieja municipality

With the help of funding from the Spanish government, this renovated Library serves as a role model for other public libraries. This is a modern, functional and well-equipped library with a variety of activities for children, students and adults. The delegation found some of the titles from the banned books list here.

Enrique José Varona, Marianao,

An exhibition in the lobby of the works of local artists welcomed the visitor. The children's library featured a contest to write the best letter to José Martí. Children's activities were, in general, a priority: movies, discussion groups, art workshops and a puppet theatre. The puppet theatre was sponsored by the Martin Luther King Foundation which had also sponsored a computer for the reference area and training courses for staff. Otherwise the Library is short of money and though the situation is slowly improving, very few books date from later than the mid 1980s. The Library is part of the Minerva Club pilot project which will provide readers with new books. The Library, founded in 1947, lends 54,000 volumes a year and has a total of 32 staff members five of whom are professionals. Two library school students are also staff in the Library.

Maxímo Coméz, Habana Vieja

Located in downtown Havana close to the Capitol building, this library will offer new services and facilities when it re-opens to the public in August 2001 after a total re-construction: The 68,000 volumes will be on open shelves, an IT laboratory with three computers will offer Internet access, and reading facilities will be established in the courtyard. The Library plays an important role in the local community.

Manuel Cofino-Lopéz, Arroyo Naranjo

This library opened in 1983 in a former convent chapel located next to the local school and the nuns will still come to visit today. The Library, including its branches, serves 180,000 inhabitants in the municipality and also provides services to the disabled. It holds a collection of books which is taken directly into the community and presented to readers. The Library has 25,800 volumes in stock and provides services to 2,000 users per month. During our visit, an exhibition of new books including the book reviews was displayed.

René Orestes Reine, 10 de Octubre

Blind and visually impaired readers in Cuba receive services either through special organisations or at the local library as in this case where a blind employee looks after a collection of 37 titles in 280 volumes in Braille. The Library, opened in 1982, also holds a quite substantial collection of foreign literature. The total stock amounts to 35,000 volumes and around 70 users visit per day.

José Martí, Regla

Located in an area where the Santería religion is practised, this Library not only holds a special African/Cuban collection but also contributes to the local culture by publishing works of local writers. An exhibition of children's colourful paintings is another example of the links between the community and the Library. As in other libraries, a José Martí collection and a piano are part of the furniture. However, a toy collection for the use of children who do not attend kindergarten is an initiative not seen at the other sites visited. The Library was founded in 1959 and moved to its present location with the help of Spanish funding in 1995. It holds 8,000 titles in 15,000 volumes and services 2,000 registered and 3,000 unregistered users per year. The Library receives some book donations but would like to engage in co-development projects with other organisations also from abroad, eg Spain, Portugal, Italy and the US.

Conclusion

Though the libraries visited are supposed to be among the best, the shortage of funding is indeed visible. The collections are generally in a very poor condition, since 1991 only a few new books have been purchased. To what extent Cuba's humid weather conditions add to the deterioration of the collections is hard to tell, but the lack of air conditioning cannot improve the situation. The libraries operate with closed access in various degrees though in some libraries it is possible to browse. At the relatively new Rubén Martínez Viellena Library, especially, it was a disappointment that the stacks were closed. It was said that the glass walls could not carry the weight of the shelves. Normal procedure when borrowing a book is to fill in a form with name of author and title and wait for the librarian to retrieve the book. Except in a few libraries, public access to computers and to the Internet is unavailable to users. It is hoped that the situation will change within the next five years. With the limited resources at their disposal, the librarians are doing a very professional job. The services for the blind and visually impaired deserve special mention - a national library with a whole room reserved for services for the handicapped is seldom seen. In addition, the variety of activities for children and adults and the role art plays in everyday life in the libraries are impressive.

The Independent Libraries

Official reactions to the project

Cuban authorities admit to the existence of the independent libraries but claim "no professional librarians, artists or other intellectuals are involved in the campaign" which they do not consider as a library movement. "Consisting of small private collections of books of which most can be borrowed in the public libraries or bought at bookshops the independent libraries are as such no success". Since they are not trained as librarians but journalists or otherwise, the staff is considered "un-professional with the lack of control of the acquisitions and knowledge of users". They rather see the initiative as a project supported by the US government and the exile Cuban community in Miami with the purpose of intimidating Cuba in general and Cuban libraries in particular. However, they repeatedly stressed that the delegates were most welcome to visit the sites and have a look for themselves.

ASCUBI first learned of the independent libraries via the Internet and e-mails from abroad but has, to date, not taken an official position on the issue. This spring, however, ASCUBI, for the first time, gave a presentation on the issue at meeting for library directors in the Havana region. It is suggested by ASCUBI that only the management of Cuban libraries knows of the existence of the independent libraries, but otherwise they are unknown to librarians and to the general public.

Organisation

The independent libraries consist of small collections of books housed in the private homes of their "directors". However, compared to 18 independent libraries in September 1999, the initiative has grown quite rapidly to a total of 82 in April 2001 according to a list published by the executives of the movement that is organised with a director, assistant director, co-ordinator for public relations, secretary and 10 provincial co-ordinators. The project was initiated in 1998 but the first initiatives were begun in 1994.

Mission of the independent libraries

According to the movement "the mission of the project is to provide access to literature and information that cannot be bought in Cuba or borrowed from the public libraries. Full access to all of the collections of the libraries is a privilege for the few - and for foreigners. The independent libraries therefore present an alternative point of view and provide access to a diversity of ideas as well as supporting and promoting authors that are not officially published. They provide an alternative, independent service in the absence of a proper public one. They do not wish to combine the cultural project with the political. Should the government allow all kind of books in the professional libraries the project would have fulfilled its mission and would close within few days we were told. Currently, "the authorities/customs are confiscating hundreds of books on the lists they received when the libraries ask for import permission". On the other hand, the movement believes that "the government does not want to pay the political price by closing the independent libraries as they have the right to lend books but not to encourage Cubans to think".

Visits to independent libraries

The independent libraries visited were:

- Biblioteca "Juana Alonso Rodríguez"
- Biblioteca "24 de febrero"
- Biblioteca "Manuel Sanguily"
- Biblioteca "Dulce María Loynaz"
- Biblioteca "Jorge Mañach"

Organisation of the visits

The delegates had names and addresses of the libraries from CubaNet and Mr Robert Kent and visited 5 located in central Havana and its outskirts. We tried to get in contact with 9 libraries but in two cases the phone number and the address did not correspond. One library was closed as the owner had left the country two months earlier, and another no longer had a book collection. Most visits were arranged by telephone. Everywhere, we were received with great hospitality and openness in regard to the project and activities involved.

Not all delegates visited all of the libraries, except for the IFLA/FAIFE representative. At each visit, though, a Spanish-speaking colleague was present and around two hours was spent at each site looking at the collection and interviewing the owner in regard to the following issues:

- purpose of the activity
- financial support/donations from abroad
- cooperation between the libraries
- cooperation with public libraries
- professional training
- collection
- library function
- implications for the owner

Purpose of the activities

All of the independent librarians visited stated that they wanted the libraries to be independent of politics. The purpose is both cultural and educational they would like people to know about "other cultures and the rest of the world on the grounds of love, peace and human rights". They provide information that is not allowed by the government and invite all to borrow regardless of religious or political opinions.

Financial or other support from abroad

In most cases, the owners denied that the libraries received financial support from abroad. They know the rumour has spread that the American government, or the Cuban community in Miami, are sponsoring the movement but they denied that this is the case. They do, however, receive assistance and books from countries including Mexico, Latin America, the United States, Argentina, Bahamas and the US Interest Section in Cuba which sends books every month. They value the support and work of the Friends of Cuban Libraries which publishes news on CubaNet and the help received from Miami support groups which send Christian literature and books about America. Recently, other support groups have been established both in and outside Cuba. As they are entirely dependent on donations from abroad they ask for international solidarity and cooperation.

Cooperation between the libraries

The librarians come together frequently to exchange books, partake in discussion on books and occasionally to hold a meeting or an event. As part of the joint activities of the movement a literary conference, attended by around 100 people, was recently arranged. The programme, shown to the delegates, included readings of poetry, giving away of awards, activities for children, etc.

Cooperation with public libraries

There is no contact to the public libraries, at least not officially. The leadership has, however, tried to contact Marta Terry, President of ASCUBI, about a meeting of independent libraries but received no response. The lack of contact with the professional libraries is explained on grounds of their status as allegedly illegal and counter revolutionary. The independent libraries have tried to donate books to public libraries but in most cases the gift was not accepted while in another it was - eg a copy of The Diary of Anne Frank. The general attitude is that there is no point donating books if they are stacked away. Some of the collection owners do borrow books at the public libraries.

Professional training

They have not received any professional training. They do not consider themselves librarians but see themselves as servants of the independent libraries. Several directors have an academic background or are active journalists. It was mentioned that some independent libraries receive some professional help on matters of classification and general library information. Though this has not been confirmed, the fact remains that we saw some collections arranged in broad subject group using Dewey numbers.

Collections

The size of the collections varies from 289 to 2,000 volumes. They consist of the owner's own books, books left by people who have left the country and by donations from abroad. Mostly the collections are in bad shape but due to the donations there seem to be relatively more new books compared to the collections in the public libraries. The topics represented are: religion, philosophy, politics, economy, statistics, social science, legislation, books on other cultures, essays, novels, poems, magazines, news papers, reference materials and, in some libraries, children's books. Most books are in Spanish but we saw materials in English and other languages as well. In most cases, the collections were arranged in no professional order but they were in others in broad subjects groups using Dewey numbers. None of the libraries can afford to buy books and they are entirely dependent on donations. We heard examples of custom interception of imported books. In three cases, Cuban customs had prohibited books on grounds of "morals, good custom or well-being and the general interests of the country" according to Resolution 596. In some cases, customs had refused to return the book lists to the sender. The delegation saw two examples of what appeared to be authentic documents. In all cases the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights was among the books prohibited. The delegation later asked the President of the National Assembly whether it was possible for citizens to complain if the customs office refused the import of books. He confirmed that it was possible to complain and referred to the incidents as failures in procedures made by subordinates.

Library function

In no cases, did signs on the building indicate the library or its opening hours. People

found out about the services by word-of-mouth, CubaNet or Radio Martí, which is based in Miami. The users either come to the libraries or books are brought to them in their homes. The number of users is around 200 at each site and includes members of the Party, the local doctor and his patients. When visited, between 27 and 200 titles were on loan. Some libraries hold acquisition lists and lists of borrowers and loans.

Implications for the owner

The people we met defined themselves as -"dissidents"- and were very open about their political views. Since the state is the employer, all the owners had lost their jobs, not on ground of their library activities, but because of their political work. Most of them received financial support from their families while others had managed to find temporary jobs outside their professional fields. Generally, the authorities do not hinder the owners in building and keeping collections but incidents of permanent or temporarily confiscations of parts of the collections were reported and libraries are from time to time kept from bringing books into the country we were told. In several cases the state police had visited the premises. Many had been arrested more than once - in all cases, except for one, on grounds of political activities not because of the book collection. All reported that their telephones were tapped and that phone calls could not be made outside the country.

Evaluation of the Independent Libraries

It is true that the independent libraries are not run by trained librarians, and that the buildings do not display their function, and that acquisition and other professional activities may not be managed according to professional standards. However, the fast growing number of libraries appears to support the view that the libraries and the collections offer an alternative and seem to some effect to fill a need for information, which for whatever reason, is not easily available at the public libraries. There are many libraries in many parts of the world which provide invaluable services but which would not conform to a strict definition of a professional library. Since most of the owners of the collections are well educated and committed people doing the best they can to support the spread of information, the argument that they are not "professionals" is largely irrelevant.

From an external point of view, most of the books we saw do not represent a challenge to the government or the cultural policy of Cuba. In fact, we saw several books also which were also found at the public libraries.

Since the people we interviewed confirmed that their arrests have mostly been made on grounds of their political work as dissidents not because of their library activities, we will refrain from officially commenting on these incidents in the context of this report.

Conclusion

Free access to information in Cuba is not a black or white situation. As stated in the introductory quotation, Cuban librarians look at the question of human rights in regard to free access to information from another perspective than IFLA/FAIFE, but not all that differently. This explains some of the complexity of the current situation and why, whenever an issue is argued to a conclusion, it is as easily contradicted by a new

argument that generates new questions instead of straight answers. We will, however, look at some of the main issues which prevent free access to information on grounds of political priorities, the US embargo and the consequences it has for the Cuban economy and infrastructure.

Free access to information

In regard to politically inflicted censorship, the Director of the National Library Mr Eliades Acosta said during our discussions: "We are not brutal censors. Selection is not censorship. We have the right to choose the titles ourselves on background of quality and economy. It is not the government that selects the books but the librarians. We have a selection policy, not censorship".

The responsibilities of Cuban libraries are stated in the *Regulations of the public libraries network in Cuba* of March 2000: "Cuban public libraries have been created according to the cultural and educational policies of the Revolution ...with the purpose of guaranteeing the right of our citizens to culture, information, study, research and recreation..." "In the selection, formation and renovation of its collections the general cultural and scientific interests as well as those of the community will be taken into account." The regulations suggest that should a work hold opinions that contradict the cultural or educational policy of the country it is not likely to be selected and made publicly available. On this ground, Cuba's government politics provides a fixed framework for the selection of materials and thus the possible infliction of censorship in various degrees through selection policies. From what we learned, there is no doubt that a wide range of information or literature expressing current opinions is unavailable in the libraries of Cuba. Even when publications are held, their use may be restricted or monitored to the extent that ordinary people may be inhibited or even prevented from gaining access to them. It can be argued that the fast growing number of independent libraries indicates the existence of information gap and that they help by supplying a need that otherwise cannot be filled by public libraries.

With implementation plans for the Internet already in motion in the libraries, Cuba's next challenge is the question of free access to Internet based information. The lines of the coming policy have been indicated by the director of IDICT, Mr Luis A. Mourellos in an interview on CIO.com in May 2001. To the question: "Is there a perception that the Internet is a threat to the current political ideology, and has the Cuban government imposed any censorship on the Internet?" he answered: "Do you mean in terms of access? That's the question I'm always asked. The answer is yes, but it has to do with the priorities that the country has established and the limitations of the infrastructure". In his answer to the next question: "Do you think if the infrastructure could handle more access that the government would allow more access?" he developed his point further: "In one way or another every country decides to what degree you can access the Internet and what you can't do and where you can go and where you can't. I think Cuba also has a right to at least think about how to protect its culture, its society and its people from things that could be damaging to them". However, in a comment at the ACURIL conference, Eliades Acosta said: "Access to the Internet with no restrictions secures freedom of access to information. The Internet is a cultural not a political instrument" - a view that shares the principles of free access to information. These mixed messages suggest that the Government of Cuba intends to continue some form of control over access to information via the Internet.

The aim of IFLA/FAIFE is to defend the universal rights of people to have free access to

information, ideas and works of imagination in whatever formats or media. It is not the role of IFLA/FAIFE to take a position on the political structures or institutions of a nation. However, we would encourage Cuba to support the free flow of information via the Internet and in print. To this end, we welcome the ASCUBI initiative to develop a code of ethics for the standards and principles of library services in Cuba with the assistance of IFLA.

In regard to the Independent Libraries, there is no doubt that the Cuban government and library community are offended by what they see as a political campaign intended to destroy the picture of Cuban libraries and to praise services which they do not consider to offer a valid alternative. However, we believe that dialogue and cooperation will produce better results than condemnation in regard to safeguarding free access to information and see the debate of the independent libraries as the first step towards a shared understanding of their cultural mission. We encourage ASCUBI and the Cuban library community to enter into dialogue with the operators of the independent libraries and to seek their involvement with and support of the further development of all libraries in Cuba.

The US embargo

In our discussions with Cuban representatives, the direct and indirect affects of the US embargo were repeatedly identified as the most important issue concerning access to information in Cuban libraries. Considering the standard of the libraries we visited, which probably are among the best resourced in the country, we have no doubt that the embargo seriously damages the capacity of the Cuban people to access information despite the formal exclusion of information materials from the embargo.

Even that exclusion is limited since donations of books from the US have to go through a third country, which impedes normal relations and the information supply.

The economic effects clearly include a severe reduction in the capacity to purchase print and electronic information materials, which is demonstrated by the poor state of the library collections and the lack of new books including many necessary reference sources and other basic materials. More generally, the economic situation does not allow for the purchase of materials beyond what is most needed or of the highest priority. In addition to the lack of foreign currency and unfavourable exchange rates, the import of foreign books attracts a tax of 40%. Lack of foreign currency for the purchase of paper for book production and preservation materials represent other limitations.

Apart from the direct economic effects, there are many indirect effects on libraries and access to information. The unreliable Cuban power supply is said to affect the opening hours of its libraries.

The restrictions on telecommunications and information technology disrupt access to information. Despite the high level of literacy and education, the lack of computers and Internet accessibility in libraries means that Cubans cannot take advantage of existing technologies and applications let alone participate in international cooperation or development at the same level as other countries. Though Cuba obtained access to the Internet in 1986, IDICT is still the chief provider and accessibility is extremely limited with priority given to scientists.

The restrictions on travel to the US by Cubans inhibit the normal exchange of information and development of professional relations between the two countries.

Examples of Cuban professionals being denied visas by the US authorities and thus prevented from attending meetings and conferences have been reported. Similarly, the difficulties US citizens experience in travelling to Cuba, although not as bad as they used to be, still inhibit exchange.

Recommendations

It is recommended that, in maintaining its strong stand in support of free access to information and the necessarily related need for freedom of expression, and its firm opposition to violations of free access to information by all governments and others, IFLA/FAIFE should:

1. State its strongly felt concerns about the effects of the US embargo that include
 - obstacles to the export of information materials to Cuba despite their formal exclusion from the embargo
 - a severe reduction in the capacity of Cuban libraries and citizens to purchase information materials and related technologies due to the economic effects of the embargo
 - indirect disruption of access to information by Cubans and Cuban libraries caused by the effects on power supply, telecommunications and other aspects of life in Cuba
 - inhibitions to professional interaction and exchange caused by the restrictions on travel to the US by Cuban nationals and to Cuba by US nationals.
2. Urge the US Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information and professional interaction imposed by its embargo and any other US Government policies.
3. Urge the Cuban Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies.
4. Support and continue to monitor initiatives by all Cuban libraries, official and unofficial, to safeguard free access to print and electronic information, including via the Internet.
5. Encourage ASCUBI and Cuban official libraries and the independent libraries to enter into dialogue in order to recognise their cultural initiative and support for free access to information.
6. Encourage IFLA colleagues to attend the international conference on information in Havana 22-26 April 2002 hosted by IDICT to help further professional relation with Cuba.

References

- Cuba Wants IT. CIO.com Online Report, May 2001. Interview with IDICT director Luis A. Mourellos.
- IFLA/FAIFE Report on Independent Libraries in Cuba. IFLA/FAIFE Office, September 1999.
- IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Cuba, IFLA/FAIFE Office, 2001. § Report on Cuban Issue, January 15, 2001. ALA, International Relations Committee, Latin American and Caribbean Subcommittee.
- Report on a Visit to ACURIL XXXI and its Host Country, Cuba, May 23 - May 30, 2001, ALA, July 2001.

- Report on a Visit to Cuba, 23-30 may 2001 by Ross Shimmon.
- 14 Days in Cuba: A Land of People Living in Between by Dale Vidar in NewBreed Librarian, April 2001
- Friends of Cuban Libraries News Bulletins, available from Robert Kent at Rkent20551@cs.com

Visits and meetings

Thursday 24 May:

José Martí National Library
 Library Association of Cuba, ASCUBI
 Institute of Documentation and Scientific Technical Information, IDICT
 Cuban Scientific Technical Society, SOCIT

Friday 25 May:

Museum of Literacy
 Cuban Artists and Writers Union Publishing Council, UNEAC
 Superior Art Institute, ISA
 Meeting with staff from the library school and the Faculty of Social Communication, Havana University
 Ministry of Culture, MINCULT, vice-minister Mr Ismael González

Saturday 26 May:

Rubén Martínez Villena Public Library, Habana Vieja municipality
 The Book Institute, Instituto Cubano del Libro, Habana Vieja
 Cuban Book Friendship Society, SCAL

Monday 30 May:

ACURIL Conference
 Meeting with the President of National Assembly

Tuesday 29 May:

Visits to public libraries:
 Enrique José Varona, Marianao
 Máximo Coméz, Habana Vieja
 Manuel Cofino-López, Arroyo
 Naranjo René Orestes Reine, 10 de Octubre
 José Martí, Regla

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