

## HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN CUBA

### ISSUE

Lack of progress in civil and political rights in Cuba remains the principal human rights concern for the Government of Canada. The recent visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to Cuba, economic reforms toward more open markets, and relaxation of restrictions on the Catholic Church and civil society are positive steps. However, Cuba has not taken substantive steps to fundamentally improve its human rights record.

### BACKGROUND

The lack of freedom of expression and freedom of association, and the absence of an independent judiciary are the key areas of concern. Restrictions of these rights remain codified in the penal code. The most common charges under the Cuban penal code are "illegal association", "enemy propaganda", or "disrespect". In the last year, constraints on public discussion have eased somewhat, and the social control exercised by the neighbourhood Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CAR) has decreased. However, outright opposition to the Revolution and to the central role of the Communist Party is not permitted.

Recent economic policy reforms, such as the legalization of the possession of US currency, and the opening of farmers, industrial and artisan markets have introduced a significant degree of liberalization and market orientation into the centrally-planned economy.

Estimates of the number of people imprisoned for their political views in Cuba range from 200 to 1200, but are extremely difficult to corroborate. Some political detainees are released quickly while others can be held for several months or longer before being charged. Dismissal from jobs on the basis of political considerations is one means of suppressing dissent; there have been fewer incidents of "actos de repudio" (acts of repudiation) in the past year. While there have been occasional reports of rough treatment and harassment of opponents of the Government and of prisoners (criminal and political), there is no evidence of atrocities, summary executions or forced disappearances. There is no pattern of torture.

Cuba's consistent commitment to economic, social and cultural rights is under severe pressure due to the weak state of the economy. The sharp contraction of the economy following the loss of support from the former USSR and COMECON continues to cause economic hardship to the Cuban people and is undermining the social infrastructure built up over thirty-five years. Still, the Government is making a substantial effort to ensure that Cubans continue to enjoy one of the more accessible and effective systems of health, education and social security in Latin America. The impact of market reforms and service charges for basic necessities such as water and electricity on Cuba's traditional commitment to economic and social rights has yet to be determined.