**Roberto Quiñones from Prison: No Prison Bars Can Overpower My Soul**

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Roberto Jesús Quiñones Haces | Tuesday, October 1, 2019 | 8:11 AM

Guantanamo, Cuba – Today is September 20th, the day of my 62nd birthday.

Sitting on the floor and resting a sheet of paper on a file I’ve placed on my bunk bed, I write these lines. I am in cubicle number 4 of the 1-A inmates’ unit at the Guantanamo Provincial Prison, in Cuba. The space measures approximately 15 meters long by 9 meters wide. It holds 10 bunk beds, two toilets for urinating and defecating –which inmates refer to as “Turks”-, and a filthy and rusted metal tank which holds water for drinking and bathing.

The water is pumped to the prison directly from a nearby river. Today, that water is extremely murky. There now 20 inmates in this cubicle, and as I write my impressions down on paper, I am surrounded by a group that’s playing dominoes, another that’s playing chess. I’m also surrounded by non-stop inmate conversations.

I was arrested on Wednesday, September 11th around 5 pm. To the many violations of due process committed against me by the police and by the Guantanamo People’s Municipal Court –which I already denounced in my appeals motion- the court added another violation. Initially, on Friday, August 30th, the ordered me to report to prison on September 12th. Soon after, On September 3rd, I was summoned to report on the 5th, without cancellation of the previous order. Although I had announced that I would not be reporting to prison, I should not have been arrested on September 11th, but after the 12th, instead.

I knew I would be arrested at any time, and in my living-room I had a bag packed with the essentials. So, when my wife awakened me from a pleasant nap to tell me there were three police officers in an official car in front of our house, I was not surprised.

**Once more in the tyrants’ dungeons**

I left my house escorted by the three police agents. They did not handcuff me, and treated me with respect. Neighbors were watching. I felt impotent and angry, but as I passed in front of State Security headquarters and got closer to the prison proper, both feelings gave way to a great sense of calm.

The car reached the prison and headed directly to the metal entrance gate. Once inside, I was shocked by the aggressive and hopeless countenance of some of the inmates, and a poem by Cesar Vallejo came to mind. You could hear the vulgar talk of inmates bouncing off the prison’s central hallway walls. From behind the window-sill railings, an inmate says loudly: “Now you are inside the zone, newcomer.” And another one sneers: “Fresh meat.”

Twenty years ago, I was in this very prison, and I thought I would never come back. If I am here again it’s because I did not cave in to Castro’s communist blackmail. On Thursday, September 12th, I was taken to cubicle number 4 where another 7 inmates were awaiting classification. Classification is a process through which prison officials determine to which floor inmates will be assigned to start serving their terms.

From the moment I arrived, I asked to phone my home, but in my case, prior authorization must be secured from the officials in charge. This is a right added to Cuba’s correctional regulations after Cuban authorities learnt about the conditions that the five Cuban spies enjoyed in American prisons. While in prison, the five exchanged letters freely with thousands of people and were interviewed by the media.

Once I passed inspection this Friday, September 20th, I insisted again on my right to make that phone call. Finally, I will exercise that right on Saturday, September 21st.

**Don’t complain: other prisons are worse**

In spite of the bed bugs, the poor quality of both water and food, in spite of the roaches and mosquitos, other inmates have assured me that Guantanamo prison provides better conditions than the three prisons in Santiago de Cuba, namely Mar Verde, Boniato and Aguadores. They advised me not to complain because inmates who demand their rights here are punished.

Lunch today was white rice, boiled plantain, watery black-bean soup and a black blood-sausage that smelled and tasted badly. For dinner, they served *congrí* rice, boiled plantain, a meat paste and soup. In spite of the poor quality of our food, I gave thanks to God for them, as I always do, and also for my birthday regardless of the circumstances in which I am celebrating it.

I use the verb “to celebrate” fully conscious of what I am stating. I celebrate being here for having prioritized my dignity in the face of coercion. I celebrate not giving up in spite of the injustices I endured and the pain caused to my beloved family. I celebrate being able to share the pain with other people who are suffering, are excluded or forgotten. And I thank God for giving me strength. As I wrote in a poem in my book *Los apriscos del alba* (Sheepfolds of Dawn): no prison bars can overpower my soul

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