NOT ANOTHER MINUTE IN PRISON!

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La Habana, Cuba. On January 11, it will be four months that Cienfuegos-native Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces, independent journalist, lawyer and writer, has been in prison.

Quiñones was sentenced to a one-year prison term in a make-shift trial that was blatantly rigged by Cuba’s State Security. A decent, gentle and peaceful man, Quiñones was accused of violently resisting police arrest when he was attempting to cover the trial against members of a religious group. Police agents beat him. Although there were witnesses to this aggression, it was said later that the lesions were self-inflicted.

The regime acted in total disregard of the most basic judicial norms. The objections raised by international human rights organizations and those for the protection of journalists, were useless. His trial and sentencing occurred days after U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, expressed his concern for Quiñones and demanded his freedom.

For several months, Quiñones had been threatened and constantly harassed by the political police, allegedly for upsetting the authorities with his news articles for Cubanet. They prevented him from leaving Guantánamo, not even to visit his elderly and gravely-ill father in Cienfuegos, who died days after the trial).

With Roberto Quiñones’ imprisonment, the regime has wanted to teach a lesson and intimidate independent journalists, silence them, force them into exile, insinuating that another repressive wave could occur like the one in the spring of 2003.

The possibility of this happening again is not remote. In recent time, police harassment of independent journalists has increased. Many have been arrested, their working tools have been confiscated or they have been barred from leaving their homes to prevent their reporting on specific events. In addition, several –labeled as “regulated” individuals- have been prevented from traveling abroad. Their relatives also have been threatened.

Journalists who have been victims of one form or another of retaliation in recent months are many: Luz Escobar, Ana León, Camila Acosta, Jorge Olivera, Augusto César San Martín, Rudy Cabrera, Vladimir Turró, to mention only a few.

Cuba, in close competition with other dictatorships, continues to hold the sad privilege of being one of the countries where exercising journalism freely is most difficult.

As the regime’s fear rises about a possible public outbreak for the deteriorating economic conditions, everything indicates that repression will increase against journalists who, with their reports, contradict the ridiculously-forced, triumphalist official story.

The regime is not any more tolerant, not even toward alternative news mediums that have surged in recent years that avoid direct criticism, and which many consider are an attempt to blur –and render obsolete- real journalism with the innovative way they chronicle events. Many who collaborate in these alternative mediums, mostly young journalists from the official press, have been pressured by authorities. Not few of them have opted for going abroad. Distrustful observers feel that in some cases, the Castro regime is attempting a take-over of Cuban exiled media.

In spite of the repressors’ contempt, we independent journalists will not give up our struggle for freedom of the press and of expression. It’s our commitment to Cuba.

Now, more than ever, we need the support of Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and every international entity that can demand from the Castro regime to stop punishing the work of journalists.

We will not stop demanding the release of Roberto de Jesús Quiñones. Keeping him in prison one minute longer is an affront to dignity and decorum. Free him, NOW!

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