

Cuba releases prisoner of conscience

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Cuba's longest serving prisoner of conscience has been conditionally released following more than 13 years of incarceration.

Francisco Chaviano González, president of an unofficial human rights group, was arrested by Cuban State Security police at his Havana home on 7 May 1994 on charges of "revealing state security secrets" and falsifying public documents.

It was reported that moments before his arrest, a person believed to be unknown to him handed him a compromising document which was found by State Security and used as a pretext for detaining him on the grounds that he was "highly dangerous".

In April 1995 he was sentenced by a military tribunal to 15 years in prison, the maximum sentence for these charges under Cuban law. Amnesty International believed his trial did not conform to international fair trial standards and declared him a prisoner of conscience.

Having served 13 years and three months of his sentence, he was conditionally released on 10 August.

A former mathematics teacher and married with three children, Francisco Chaviano González is president of the National Council for Civil Rights in Cuba (Consejo Nacional por los Derechos Civiles en Cuba - CNDCC), whose work includes documenting the cases of Cubans who have been lost at sea trying to leave the country.

He was reportedly beaten on several occasions at the time of arrest and again on 17 June 1999, when prison guards broke his tibia and caused injuries to his face, according to reports received by Amnesty International. On several different occasions he undertook hunger strikes to draw attention to his conditions of detention.

Francisco Chaviano González is the fourth prisoner of conscience to be released this year. However, dissident groups on the island do not believe that these releases represent an improvement in the human rights situation as those freed had served their full sentence or were eligible for early release. There are still 62 other prisoners of conscience imprisoned in Cuba and many others whose incarceration is politically motivated.

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