

7 June 2016

## **Cuba - Judicial harassment of human rights defenders *Berta Soler Fernández* and *Leticia Ramos Herreria***

On 1 June 2016, prominent human rights defender Ms **Leticia Ramos Herreria**, leader of *Damas de Blanco Laura Pollán* (Ladies in White Laura Pollán) in the city of Cárdenas, was put under house arrest. On 22 May 2016, her colleague, Ms **Berta Soler Fernández**, leader of Ladies in White Laura Pollán in Havana, was violently arrested as she was on her way to attend the investiture ceremony of the newly elected Bishop in Havana Cathedral. These events are the latest in a series of acts of repression and judicial harassment against members of the Ladies in White.

The Ladies in White are an internationally acclaimed peaceful civic movement made up of wives and female relatives of jailed dissidents. Since 2003, they have consistently advocated for the release of political prisoners in Cuba by attending mass every Sunday wearing white clothing, to symbolise peace, and silently walking through the streets of various towns and cities in Cuba. In 2005, the Ladies in White were awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament.

On 1 June 2016, [Leticia Ramos Herreria](#) was put under house arrest relating to charges brought against her following her arrest on 25 April 2016. The charges included inciting criminal activity and disorderly conduct, which could carry a prison sentence of up to one year, due to the human rights defender's participation in a peaceful demonstration in front of the offices of the Cuban Communist Party in Cárdenas on the same day. On 1 June 2016, Leticia Ramos was first apprehended by high representatives of the security forces including the chief of Counter Intelligence of Matanza, as she crossed Bacunayagua Bridge between Matanza and Havana. The human rights defender was told she was not allowed to roam freely and was then taken to a police station, after which she was taken to her home where she is to remain under house arrest. She is prohibited from leaving the country as a result of the charges brought against her.

On 22 May 2016, [Berta Soler Fernández](#), leader of the Ladies in White in Havana, was violently arrested and was taken to the Alamar Police Headquarters where she remained from 3 to 11 pm without access to water or food. Berta Soler was charged with resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer, which could carry a prison sentence of up to five years. The human rights defender was subsequently released, but is not allowed to leave the country because of the charges brought against her. It is also strongly believed that she is under surveillance.

On 25 April 2016, Leticia Ramos was beaten, arrested and denied medical treatment whilst in detention as a result of her participation in a peaceful demonstration in front of the offices of the Cuban Communist Party in Cárdenas on the same day. The defender was protesting human rights violations and violence against numerous members of the Ladies in White. After being released from detention, the human rights defender was hospitalised. Furthermore, the human rights defender's youngest son is also under surveillance in his own home. On 16 October 2015, both of her sons were severely beaten by police officers in front of her as a brutal act of intimidation against her.

The Ladies in White and their relatives have been regularly subjected to numerous abuses by law enforcement authorities as a result of their peaceful activism in favour of prisoners of conscience. Most recently, on 29 May 2016, 75 members of the Ladies in White were arrested as they made their way to their usual Sunday mass to demand the release of political prisoners, 7 more were arrested after mass, including Leticia Ramos. In March 2016, previous to and during the visit of US President Barack Obama, the Cuban authorities staged a [crackdown on civil society](#) movements, most fiercely targeting the Ladies in White movement. Dozens of their members were arrested and temporarily detained during their regular Sunday march on 20 March 2016, before being released later that day. Those detained included Berta Soler Fernández.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned at the systematic persecution of members of the Ladies in White and their relatives as a result of their peaceful and legitimate activism. From the inception of the Ladies in White in 2003, a pattern of consistent abuse against these women human rights defenders has emerged in what is clearly a concerted attempt to dissuade them from their human rights work.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cuba to:**

1. Immediately drop all charges against Leticia Ramos Herreria and Berta Soler Fernández as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Immediately and unconditionally remove all restrictions on the free movement of Leticia Ramos Herreria and Berta Soler Fernández and cease all further forms of surveillance or harassment against them, as it is believed that these measures are not only solely related to their legitimate human rights activities but, furthermore, constitute a direct transgression of their rights;
3. Take all necessary measures to ensure the physical and psychological security and integrity of Leticia Ramos Herreria and her family, as well as of Berta Soler Fernández;