

16 December 2016

Cuba: Berta Soler and three other Ladies in White arbitrarily detained, one remains in incommunicado detention

On 15 December 2016, human rights defenders Ms **Berta Soler**, Ms **María Cristina Labrada**, Ms **Soldrelys Torruella** and Ms **María Hortensia Melián** were arbitrarily detained. Berta Soler was released on the night of the same day but the other three **Ladies in White** remain in detention.

[Berta Soler](#) is the leader of the movement *Damas de Blanco "Laura Pollán"* (Ladies in White "Laura Pollán"). 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. María Cristina Labrada, Soldrelys Torruella and María Hortensia Melián are also members of the Ladies in White based in Havana. In 2005, the Ladies in White were awarded the [Sakharov Prize](#) for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament, as a recognition for their work campaigning for the release of 75 jailed dissidents. However, they were barred from travelling and were not able to collect their prize until [April 2013](#). Members of the Ladies in White are frequently subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, house arrest, physical attacks, surveillance and intimidation in retaliation for their peaceful protests.

On 15 December 2016, at 9:30 in the morning, human rights defender Berta Soler was arrested by agents of the National Revolutionary Police as she stepped out of her house in Havana. Neither her family or members of the movement were notified of her whereabouts. She was held for nine hours without food or water, and released at 7pm that day. Upon release, one of the police officers threatened her saying she would be arrested every time she attempted to attend mass, knowing that this is the usual place where Ladies in White congregate before or after peacefully marching. That same day, María Cristina Labrada, Soldrelys Torruella and María Hortensia Melián were detained after attending mass in the Havana Cathedral. María Cristina Labrada remains in incommunicado detention, without any notice of her whereabouts having been given to her family members. Soldrelys Torruella and María Hortensia Melián remain in detention in the police station of Cotorro.

On 1 December 2016, several Cuban organisations denounced the repression against human rights defenders in the island at a [hearing](#) hosted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The petitioners described the violent backlash faced by defenders who denounce human rights violations in regional and international human rights forums. Human rights defenders who attended the last hearings hosted by the IACHR in April of this year have faced violent retaliation as a result of their human rights work denouncing violations in international forums. Those individuals include Leticia Ramos and Berta Soler, both leaders of the Ladies in White, Laritza Diversent, director of the human rights law firm Cubalex and Roberto de Jesús Guerra, director of the organisation for freedom of expression Hablemos Press. Amongst the forms of retaliations faced by these defenders are travel bans, arbitrary detentions, torture and inhumane treatment, constant surveillance, being followed, criminalisation, smear campaigns, acts of intimidation and death threats. In every case human rights defenders are accused of being 'traitors' and 'mercenaries' by State security agents.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arbitrary arrest and detention of members of the Ladies in White as well as of the retaliations against the human rights defenders resulting from their legitimate and peaceful human rights work.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Cuba to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release María Cristina Labrada, Soldrelys Torruella and María Hortensia Melián, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of María Cristina Labrada, Soldrelys Torruella and María Hortensia Melián, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Berta Soler, María Cristina Labrada, Soldrelys Torruella, María Hortensia Melián as well as that of their families, in consultation with the defenders;
4. Inform the family and lawyer of María Cristina Labrada of the place of her detention, and allow all of the aforementioned defenders immediate and unfettered access to their families and lawyers;
5. Immediately and unconditionally remove all restrictions on the free movement of Berta Soler and cease all further forms of surveillance or harassment against her, as it is believed that these measures are not only solely related to her legitimate human rights activities but, furthermore, constitute a direct transgression of her rights;
6. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into threats, arbitrary arrest and detention of the aforementioned human rights defenders, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
7. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Cuba are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.