

Managing the flow of financial aid

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I would like to focus attention on a matter, that is both very practical and important: the question of how to coordinate material assistance to the prisoners and their families. As we all know, assistance to the prisoners and their families is essential for their survival. Often the relatives of prisoners are in precarious situations as they witness their income being reduced by having a relative in prison and, furthermore, they frequently have to move closer to distant prisons in order to be able to visit their loved ones and to see to their needs which are, as may be assumed, numerous.

During the years, the Directorate has dedicated a great part of its work to monitoring the situation of observing human rights outside as well inside Cuban prisons. We have also concentrated on creating a database of all Cuban political prisoners whose information is accessible to us. This database has been very useful in helping these people and their relatives.

Nevertheless, a new situation is developing in which we lack coordination between the various organizations that provide assistance to prisoners. That is the reason why some prisoners receive aid from different sources while others receive less even though they are in equally distressing situations.

I would like to share information concerning what is being done already and to make suggestions how to coordinate assistance to prisoners. The Directory has a project called Proyecto Auxilio (Project Help) through which anybody who so wishes, be it individuals, exiled families or others, may sponsor a prisoner and make a promise to send him fifty dollars a month for a period of one year. This Project has been in effect for a couple of years and it has provided significant help to families of political prisoners.

Last year, several organizations of exiles joined forces and organized the concert of the famous singer Willy Chirino in Miami. Funds destined to all the political prisoners in our database were gathered there. The concert was entitled Voces por la Libertad (Voices for Freedom) and the funds were administered by the association of ex-political prisoners called Plantados Hasta la Libertad y la Democracia de Cuba (Staying Put for Cuban Democracy and Freedom), based in Miami.

All the prisoners in our database receive, at least via Voices for Freedom, some fifty dollars a month. Frankly speaking, this amount is not much considering all the difficulties that these families have to face with their loved ones in prison and all the subsequent related expenses. Furthermore, Reporters without Borders provides assistance to independent journalists who have been imprisoned and People in Need regularly sends aid as well. Of course, these NGOs are not the only ones. There are others, amongst them some that are represented in this book and that dedicate resources trying to alleviate the conditions that have proven to be extremely difficult for these families.

Nevertheless, the majority of political prisoners in Cuba do not, as yet, receive sufficient assistance. For that reason, it is important to discuss and discover the potential of NGOs to increase this level of assistance. Through utilizing the database we have compiled, we can generate a list of During the last few months, repression has increased in prisons. We have been receiving information from prisoners who are being aggressively repressed, mistreated and denied medical care. A couple of months ago, the case of Margarito Broche came to light. Margarito Broche is a human rights activist from the Villa Clara province who suffered a heart attack whilst he was a prisoner because he wasn't given the necessary medical attention in time. And there are many other cases

similar to his. Prisoners have been put to solitary confinement over long periods. Oscar Elias Biscet, for example, spent several weeks in a narrow underground cell.

We realise that harassment and repression has not only been taking place outside the prison walls, but also inside the prisons, and that the government is continuing its repression. It is, therefore, as necessary now as it has ever been to be efficient in our efforts to help these people.