

**Cuban Independent Libraries & Intellectual Freedom
Report of the Intellectual Freedom Committee
Michael Greenlee, Chair
ILA Executive Board Meeting
January 14, 2004**

Introduction

The issue of intellectual freedom and Cuba's independent libraries has again come to the attention of the American Library Association (ALA) with the arrest of 75 Cuban dissidents in mid-March 2003. The ALA will discuss what action, if any, should be taken in response to these arrests and imprisonments at the upcoming ALA MidWinter meeting in San Diego, CA. This report will provide a brief background on the situation concerning Cuban independent libraries, the past responses by the ALA and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and what response the Idaho Library Association (ILA) should take to influence the upcoming decision by the ALA.

Background

The first Cuban independent libraries were opened in 1994. The current Independent Library Project started in 1998, with the opening of the Felix Varela Library by Ramon Humberto Colas and his wife, Berta Mexidor Vasquez, in their home in Las Tunas. This action was taken in response to a statement made by Cuban President Fidel Castro that, "In Cuba there are no prohibited books, only those we do not have the money to buy." Colas and Vasquez decided to start lending people books from their own library that they could not get in the state sponsored libraries. By 2001, more than 80 independent libraries were operating throughout Cuba. The mission of the project is, "to provide access to literature and information that cannot be bought in Cuba or borrowed from the public libraries."

Those persons operating independent libraries are not trained librarians and their collections are usually organized according to broad subject categories or, in some cases, by Dewey classification. Several directors of the independent libraries have academic backgrounds or are active journalists. In most cases, the library collections are simply an individual's private book collection which has been made available to the public. As such, the size of the collections vary between 200 to 2000 volumes. All of the collection owners are self-described "dissidents," "counter-revolutionaries," or members of the "opposition movement." Most have been previously detained by the Cuban government because of their various political activities.

IFLA first investigated Cuban independent libraries in 1999, responding to allegations of human rights abuses and censorship reported by librarian Robert Kent and the Friends of Cuban Libraries. This investigation was conducted over a three-month period and included interviews with representatives from independent libraries and the Library Association of Cuba (ASCUBI). The report confirmed incidents of arrests and

harassment of independent librarians and the confiscations of books. As a result of this report, IFLA drafted an, "Open letter to the President of Cuba....," urging the Cuban government to cease the harassment of independent libraries and stating that such harassment, "violate[s] the basic human right of intellectual freedom." At the request of IFLA, the Canadian Library Association sent a similar letter to the Cuban government in April 2000, asking it, "to respect the basic principles of intellectual freedom and to put an end to the intimidation of the Independent Libraries in Cuba." Following an investigation and report issued on January 15, 2001, by the ALA's International Relations Committee, Latin American and Caribbean Subcommittee, the ALA decided to, "take no further action with respect to the current question of the 'independent' collections of books and other materials in Cuba."

ASCUBI criticized the findings of IFLA's first report for taking a one sided and unbalanced stand and for ignoring the achievements of the official libraries of Cuba. IFLA therefore scheduled another visit to Cuba between May 23-31, 2001, to further investigate the situation regarding the free access to information in Cuban libraries and to follow up on the status of the independent libraries. During this visit, IFLA was joined by a delegation from the ALA and both organizations had the opportunity to visit with several independent libraries. IFLA and the ALA issued reports of their findings with recommendations. The reports issued by IFLA and the ALA agree on their findings:

1. The size of the collections range from between 200-2000 volumes. Most of the books are older, in Spanish, and in bad shape. The books are mostly unclassified and not catalogued.
2. The independent libraries are almost entirely dependent on donations from outside Cuba. Both confirmed instances of imported books being detained by customs; in some cases the books were returned, in others they were not.
3. None of the owners of the libraries are trained librarians. All of the owners are self-described "dissidents" and most have been previously arrested for political activities.
4. Both confirmed that the independent library owners meet to discuss collection development and management, but IFLA reports frequent cooperation, whereas the ALA only reported occasional meetings.
5. There is no official cooperation between the official public libraries and the independent libraries. Independent libraries are reluctant to donate books to public libraries because they believe the books will be "stacked away," or generally made unavailable.
6. Some of the books available in the independent libraries were also found in public library collections and were reported to be available to the public.

As part of its overall recommendation, IFLA made the following statements concerning independent libraries in its July 2001 report:

"4. Support and continue to monitor initiatives by all Cuban libraries, official and unofficial, to safeguard free access to print and electronic information..."

“5. Encourage ASCUBI and Cuban official libraries and the independent libraries to enter into dialogue in order to recognise their cultural initiative and support for free access to information.”

The ALA recommendations, issued in July 2001, did not include any specific mention of the independent libraries. Recommendation #4 states,

“That ALA and ASCUBI jointly prepare a resolution for the IFLA 2001 Council meeting opposing all government policies that restrict access to information, including the U.S. economic embargo/blockade and laws in either country that contribute to censorship.”

In the final resolution adopted by IFLA on August 24, 2001, the specific references to Cuban independent libraries were eliminated. The text of Statement 4 reading, “...all Cuban libraries, official and unofficial...” was replaced with, “...the Cuban library community....” Statement 5 was eliminated altogether. Additional statements were added urging the U.S. Government to share information materials widely in Cuba.

In mid-March, 2003, the Cuban authorities arrested 75 dissidents over the space of several days. These people were given summary trials and all were sentenced to prison terms ranging between 10-28 years. Amnesty International was allowed to review trial documents for 51 of the 75 dissidents prosecuted. According to these documents, activities on which the prosecutions were based included, among others,

“being involved in groups which have not been officially recognized by the Cuban authorities and which were accused of being counterrevolutionary, including among others unofficial trade unions, professional associations such as doctors’ and teachers’ associations, academic institutes, press associations and independent libraries.”

Of the 75 dissidents arrested, 12 of them are people who operated private or independent libraries. Of these 12, at least one, Pedro Pablo Alvarez Ramos, president of an unofficial labour union, had his library confiscated; he was sentenced to 25 years in prison. The prison sentences of these twelve dissidents range from 13-25 years (9 dissidents are serving sentences of 20+ years). Amnesty International considers all 75 dissidents to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned for the legitimate, non-violent, exercise of fundamental freedoms as guaranteed under international standards.

These arrests have also drawn international condemnation and concern from groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Union, the Organization of American States, the United States, and Pope John Paul. On May 8, 2003, IFLA issued a Media Release expressing its deep concern over the arrest and imprisonment of these dissidents. IFLA also urged the Cuban government, “to respect, defend, and promote the basic human rights defined in Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

How Should ALA Respond?

Beginning in the 1940's, the ALA has increasingly defined the role of libraries and librarians as defenders of intellectual freedom. The *Library Bill of Rights*, adopted by the ALA in 1948, constitutes the ALA's basic policy on intellectual freedom. Since its adoption, the *Library Bill of Rights* has been amended three times and the ALA has officially issued 17 *Interpretations* applying these basic principles to specific library practices. Most relevant to this discussion is the *Universal Right to Free Expression*, an Interpretation adopted by the ALA in 1991.

The *Universal Right to Free Expression* (URFE) grew out of an extended debate concerning sanctions against South Africa boycotting the importation of books and other informational materials. Before its adoption in 1991, there existed no official policy on which the ALA could act in condemning the suppression of intellectual freedom on an international level. The URFE adopts principles set forth in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* establishing the Freedom of Expression (which includes freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and association) as an inalienable human right. In adopting these principles, the ALA affirmed:

The [ALA] opposes any use of government prerogative that leads to the intimidation of individuals which prevents them from exercising their rights to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas. We urge libraries and librarians everywhere to resist such abuse of government power, and to support those against whom such governmental power has been employed.

The ALA also states that it, "is unswerving in its commitment to human rights and intellectual freedom; the two are inseparably linked and inextricably entwined."

Based on these statements, it appears that the ALA has more than sufficient grounds for condemning the imprisonment of the Cuban dissidents. These persons have been imprisoned for speaking out against the administration of President Fidel Castro, seeking the non-violent reformation of the Cuban government, organizing unofficial labor unions and doctor/teacher associations, and distributing "counterrevolutionary" literature through independent libraries, violating their rights to free speech, press, assembly, and association. There has been much discussion of whether these dissidents are librarians or if their collections are libraries, but this is beside the point. The principles stated in the URFE are, "inherent in every individual," not just officially recognized librarians. ALA's defense of freedom of expression and intellectual freedom means very little if it only applies to librarians who work in "real" libraries.

I think it would be appropriate for the Idaho Library Association to show its support for the imprisoned dissidents and its affirmation of the principles of intellectual freedom by submitting the following letter to the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom urging it to take action on this issue:

SAMPLE LETTER

January 12, 2004

American Library Association
Office for Intellectual Freedom
[IFC Chairperson]

Dear [IFC Chair],

In March 2003, the Cuban government initiated a severe crackdown on the Cuban dissident movement with the arrest and summary imprisonment of 75 individuals. Among these individuals were twelve dissidents who, in addition to other political activities, operated private or independent libraries. These imprisonments have been internationally condemned and criticized by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch violating the fundamental human right of freedom of expression.

In response to these imprisonments, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), in a May 2003 media release, urged the Cuban government to respect, defend and promote the basic human rights defined in Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; to eliminate obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies; and urged the Cuban library community to monitor violations of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression and to take an active role in promoting these basic rights. In doing this, IFLA has shown itself to be committed to upholding the principles of intellectual freedom.

The American Library Association (ALA) has not yet officially condemned the actions of the Cuban government in violating the basic human rights of these individuals. According to the ALA principles of intellectual freedom, as stated in the *Universal Right to Free Expression*:

The [ALA] opposes any use of government prerogative that leads to the intimidation of individuals which prevents them from exercising their rights to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas. We urge libraries and librarians everywhere to resist such abuse of government power, and to support those against whom such governmental power has been employed.

In this same document, the ALA states that it is, “unswerving in its commitment to human rights and intellectual freedom; the two are inseparably linked and inextricably entwined.”

The Idaho Library Association urges the ALA to support those Cuban dissidents and independent librarians who have been imprisoned for upholding the principles of freedom of expression by issuing a statement condemning the arrest and imprisonment of these individuals; urging the Cuban government to respect the basic principles of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression; to put an end to the intimidation of Cuban independent libraries; and to return immediately all materials confiscated from these libraries.

Sincerely yours,

[Whatever name is appropriate]

The following documents were used in creating this report:

Independent Libraries in Cuba (IFLA/FAIFE Report on Cuba/Sept. 1999) –
www.ifla.org/faife/faife/cubarepo.htm

Libraries in Cuba (IFLA/FAIFE Report on Cuba/Aug. 2001) –
www.ifla.org/faife/faife/cubareport2001.htm

Resolution adopted at IFLA Council II held at Boston, USA on Friday 24th August 2001
www.ifla.org/IV/ifla67/resol-01.htm

IFLA Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression – Media
Release, 08 May 2003
www.ifla.org/V/press/faife-cuba03pr.htm

Canadian Library Association – Correspondence
www.cla.ca/issues/cuba.htm

Amnesty International – Cuba “Essential Measures”? Human rights crackdown in the
name of security
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAMR250172003>

Friends of Cuban Libraries – www.friendsofcubanlibraries.org

American Library Association – Report of visit to ACURIL and its host country, Cuba,
May 23 - May 30 , 2001.

Intellectual Freedom Manual, 6th ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 2002

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