

A Call for Justice: Free the Cuban Five

An interview with Netfa Freeman

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Global Research, January 15, 2014

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

Netfa Freeman is a longtime activist/organizer who has worked on Cuba solidarity issues for several years. A frequent traveler to Cuba, Netfa talks about a visit in November, in connection with an event in support of the Cuban 5.

[Elich] You've recently returned from Cuba, where you attended the Ninth International Colloquium to Free the Cuban 5. In 1998, five Cubans who were monitoring the activities of U.S.-based anti-Cuba terrorist groups were arrested by the FBI and imprisoned on charges of espionage. What can you tell us about the current status of the Cuban 5?

[Freeman] Well, all five were arrested in September of 1998. As far as their current status, I suppose the first thing people should know is that one of them, René González, was released from the Federal Correctional Institution in Marianna, Florida on October 7, 2011, after serving his entire 13 year sentence. On April 22, 2013 René returned to Cuba for his father's funeral and on May 11, Judge Lenard allowed him to stay there provided that he would renounce his United States citizenship. Soon to be released from the Fed pen in Safford, Arizona is Fernando Gonzalez, in February. This will also be because Fernando's sentence will have been served.

Antonio Guerrero is serving the last of a 21 year and 10 month sentence in Marianna, Florida. Ramón Labañino's final sentence was 30 years, which means unless true justice prevails he won't be released until 2024, when he will be 61 years old. Ramón is in Ashland, Kentucky. And lastly, Bro Gerardo Hernandez is serving two life sentences plus 15 years in Victorville, California. This of course means for Gerardo to get freedom through serving his full sentence he will have to be reincarnated twice and then still serve another 15 years.

I want to say that while we all look forward to the release of Fernando in February, I mean that for literally millions worldwide, this still won't be justice. Justice would be for all five men to have never gone to prison in the first place and for the U.S. to stop harboring terrorists, but arrest them instead.

For all of the 5, all legal options for their release have been exhausted for some time now. So, as Gerardo has said, true justice is now up to "a jury of millions," organized and mobilized.

[Elich] Given that none of these men engaged in espionage against the United States, the severity of their sentences; indeed the mere fact of their arrest, points to a political motivation. What are your thoughts on that?

[Freeman] The persecution of the Cuban 5 is consistent with the persistent 54 years of U.S. government policy against Cuba. The political motivation for which is that the U.S. is the

number one imperialist nation of the world. It cannot stand to have, just 90 miles from its shore, a truly independent country like Cuba – an island at that – successfully standing up to it while at the same time representing the best example in the world of an alternative, people versus profit-oriented society.

Because of this, U.S. official policy has been to wage a multifaceted and protracted war against Cuba and its people, which includes all forms of economic and political sabotage to destabilize the island. We're talking various methods of isolating the island through an extra-territorial trade embargo that severely impairs Cuba's ability to import and export goods and services, not just to and from the U.S. but to and from countries around the world; travel restrictions that hinder U.S. citizens' ability to go to Cuba and for Cuban citizens to come to the U.S. unless they're trying to defect; a sophisticated propaganda campaign that tries to saturate the globe with demonizing misinformation, half-truths, and outright lies against Cuba. I believe the propaganda offensive is largely unsuccessful outside of the U.S.

The U.S. government also, through agencies like USAID and so-called non-governmental organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, engages in efforts to bribe and co-opt Cuban citizens on the island to "manufacture" an internal political dissident movement.

Then there are the rabid right-wing exiles who, often with CIA complicity, have engaged in acts of terrorism that include biological warfare. I mean from contaminating water supplies and livestock with lethal diseases, to planting bombs in tourist sites and civilian aircrafts, to aerial strafing of the island.

This brings us to the Cuban 5 and the reasons they were dispatched to the U.S. to infiltrate the extremists who were responsible for the terrorism against Cuba. Few people know that over the decades these terrorist acts have killed and maimed thousands of people, and not just Cubans.

Another important thing to note as far as political motivations is that Miami, where the 5 were carrying out their mission and where they were tried, is a peculiar place when it comes to issues related to the Cuban revolution. That is where the most extreme anti-Castro, anti-Cuban Revolution groups are based and are made up of old school Cuban exiles who have a lot of obscene political control in the U.S. and are dead set on nothing less than reversing the Cuban Revolution. The Cuban 5 could have never gotten a fair trial there and we can't help but believe that they wanted to make examples of the 5. They probably feel foolish for being infiltrated by Cuba right here in the U.S.

[Elich] What measures has the Cuban government taken with the United States in order to resolve the matter and secure the release of the Cuban 5? How has the United States responded to Cuba's diplomatic proposals?

[Freeman] Greg, this a great question. Contrary to what many might believe, at times the diplomats of the two countries do get together to try to work out certain issues. For example, last September they started discussions on re-establishing direct mailing, something suspended since 1963. And of course, even between countries that have antagonistic relations, there are communications that aren't public. They're closed-door dialogues. Cuba has always been open to constructive dialogue and collaborations with the

U.S. Public statements by Cuban leaders always express an open door to at least discussing any issue as long as it's based on mutual respect for sovereignty. I recall in 2009, President Raul Castro was publicly quoted widely as saying, "We have sent word to the U.S. government in private and in public that we are willing to discuss everything — human rights, freedom of the press, political prisoners, everything."

Given how important is the issue of the Cuban 5, we can be sure that Cuba has made every effort to get justice for these heroes of theirs. Actually, they're heroes for all of us. It's been the U.S. that has time and again publicly dug in its heels, expressing a completely dishonest depiction about the case of the 5.

The Cuban government recently made it clear that they're interested in working with the U.S. to find a solution to the case of [Mr. Alan Gross](#). So if that were put into a dialogue, such a thing would only get a positive response from Cuba.

[Elich] Tell us about the International Colloquium. What were its aims?

[Freeman] Yes, this was the Ninth Colloquium and it was attended by 272 delegates, representing 51 countries from every continent. Of course Cubans also came from other provinces of the island. This particular colloquium was special because it was the first one that was able to celebrate the return of one of the 5, René González. It was five days of all kinds of activities. On the first day there was a bike marathon in solidarity for the 5. There were several plenary sessions where people from various countries doing work to get freedom for the 5, and relatives of the Cuban 5, gave presentations. There were great cultural performances of all kinds included in all the activities. The art of Antonio Guerrero was on exhibit in the museum located in the plaza at the center of Holguin City. A huge march and rally of tens of thousands of people took place at which René was the keynote speaker, after a number of heartfelt presentations, poems and songs. We visited schools and municipalities, where we were greeted and hosted by the people in the most admirable ways. Young people in Cuba are just amazing.

The aim of the Colloquium was not only to celebrate the return of René and honor all of the Cuban 5 but also to build an international solidarity among those who support Cuba and the Cuban 5. And give people who share the same regions of the world a chance to strategize on ways to get freedom for our other four brothers.

[Elich] This sounds like such an inspirational experience. I take it you were able to personally establish contacts with activists from other countries. Are there any plans at this stage for joint international efforts on behalf of the four remaining prisoners?

[Freeman] Oh yes. In fact, this is all captured in the "Final Declaration of The IX Colloquium in Holguin." There's a list of 14 agreements outlined in that document and rather than go through each one, it can be found on www.thecuban5.org. [The specific link is <http://www.thecuban5.org/wordpress/2013/11/29/final-declaration-of-the-colloquium-in-holguin/>]

I will mention two specific things though.

First is to support the International Commission of Inquiry into the case of the Five that will be held in London, March 7 – 8, 2014.

Then for the remaining four to get their freedom all it takes is the stroke of a pen by the

President of the U.S. Because of that we all agreed that our efforts must be focused, not just in the U.S., but on the seat of power in the U.S., Washington DC, in particular. So we will be organizing the Third “5 Days for The Cuban 5” in Washington DC, June 4-11, 2014. There is a broad range of activities we’ve done in Washington, DC for the last two years. It includes press conferences, lobby days on the Hill to get policymakers to use their influence to push Obama to do the right thing, public education events, cultural performances; all sorts of things. And it also includes holding simultaneous actions and demonstrations in front of U.S. embassies in all countries on the coinciding dates. Information on all of this will be available on www.thecuban5.org. Some might be there already.

[Elich] I would like to encourage our readers to access the site and to join this effort. If someone wants to get involved, I assume he or she can contact the International Committee for the Freedom of the Cuban Five. Are there any other organizations that you know of that are working on this issue?

And finally, are there any last thoughts you would like to add?

[Freeman] Another good question. There’re a lot of organizations working on this issue in the U.S. and globally. I wouldn’t know where to begin in terms of naming them and I don’t want to slight any by omission. I don’t even know them all by name. Many of them are Cuba solidarity organizations that pre-date the issue of the Cuban 5 and still work on other important things related to solidarity with Cuba. Many sprang into existence just because of the issue. I will say that why there can be so many of us, yet we still haven’t been able to make more of an impact on the freedom of the 5, is because of the disparate nature of how we work and the complexity of issues involving U.S.-Cuba relations. In the U.S., the [National Network on Cuba](#), also known as the NNOC, has struggled to forge a hub and create constructive collaboration among the various U.S.-based Cuba solidarity organizations. Or maybe best to say organizations wanting to “normalize” relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

The only last thoughts are that critical study and analysis of the relations between the U.S. and Cuba are very instructive, even for people beyond these two countries. Aside from the propaganda of corporate BS, their related histories and current realities can teach anyone a lot. It spans and bridges the differences between theoretical analysts and practical or grassroots change makers. If we really look at Cuba, accepting their human contradictions, it has led the transformation of the symbol of revolution, instead of being a militant with a gun, into being a young healthcare worker with a stethoscopes imbued with the need to create a better world.

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