

PRISONERS OF COLOR

ISLAS WILL DEDICATE A PAGE IN EACH ISSUE TO THE AFRO-CUBANS SERVING TIME IN CUBA'S PENAL SYSTEM

In many countries people are detained for trying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression, association, assembly, or movement. Some are imprisoned because they or their families are involved in political or religious activities. Some are arrested because of their connection with political parties or national movements that oppose government policies. Trade union activity or participation in strikes or demonstrations are common causes for imprisonment. Often, people are imprisoned because they questioned their government or tried to publicize human rights violations in their own countries. Some are jailed on the pretext that they committed a crime, but it is in fact because they criticized the government. People who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, color, or language and who have not used or advocated violence are considered to be prisoners of conscience.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo

Rogelio Montesinos
Political Activist
Havana, Cuba

Prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo was born on May 15th, 1967, in Santiago de Cuba. His humble working family moved to Banes, in the current province of Holguín, where Zapata Tamayo completed his primary and secondary studies, and then began to work as a bricklayer.

Because he was sensitive to the injustices and human rights violations that are commonplace in everyday Cuba, Zapata Tamayo became an activist, joining the *Alternativa Republicana* [Republican Alternative] movement, getting involved in

intense activities on behalf of the basic rights of all citizens.

He was detained for the first time on December 6th, 2002, together with acclaimed opposition leader and current prisoner of conscience Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet, when he was about to participate in a class on human rights that Biscet was about to give. Both were accused of disorderly conduct, contempt and resistance: Zapata Tamayo was sent to the Guanajay prison, where he fell victim to physical abuse at the hands of his jailers and from some common prisoners incited by the former.



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After being freed in January of 2003, Zapata Tamayo continued his resistance work and took part in a hunger protest, with a number of well-known opposition leaders. By March 20th, 2003, he was once again arrested, summarily tried, and sentenced to 18 years of prison. He began serving it at the Quivicán prison, in the Province of Havana.

In 2006, he was transferred to the Taco Taco prison, in the Pinar del Río province, where he was subjected to summary proceedings for charges of disobedience, resistance, disorderly conduct, and damaging prison properties—all with no judicial or procedural guarantees.

During all his years of imprisonment, Zapata Tamayo showed and maintained a firm and resolute attitude towards the injustices and excesses to which Cuban pris-

oners are subjected. He behaved as a “preso plantado” [an uncooperative prisoner] his whole time there, refusing to wear the regulation uniform, living in permanent isolation, and often being confined to punishment cells and given repeated beatings. He went on hunger strikes a number of times, which caused his health to deteriorate considerably.

Prison authorities denied Zapata Tamayo religious assistance, just one more form of reprisal for his unswerving conduct and many of the denunciations he managed to make while in prison, to let the world know about the continuing injustices and rights violations perpetrated against political and common prisoners.

Zapata Tamayo’s family, his mother, Reina Luisa Tamayo Danger, in particular, was also a victim of the prison authority’s and political police’s arbitrariness. She personally witnessed her son’s physical mistreatment, and was kept on various occasions from seeing her son because he was in a punishment cell. Zapata Tamayo, who was declared a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International, bears the scars of all the beatings he has suffered, and the tell-tale signs of needing medical treatment for his many ailments and not having received it.