

# The CIR During an Historic Year

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The year 2012 was a very special challenge for the relatively young *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration*. It was a year during which the civically oriented institution should have firmly established its strength, intellectually, and as an organization; secured its connections and international prestige, and all this without neglecting to strongly challenge the Cuban authorities' repressive attacks on it. The year also coincided with the bicentennial of the conspiracy led by José Antonio Aponte, and the hundredth anniversary of the massacre of the Independent Party of Color's (PIC) members.

In dealing with anniversaries so significant to our history, the Cuban government missed out on a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge those events' leaders as significant heroes of the struggles for independence, equality and justice, and as precursors of the highest minded political projects of their time. What has been written about these events by scholars and the official media doesn't manage to tell the real, historical truth, much less does it reveal a consistent political will for acknowledging the role of Africans and their descendants in the economic, political, social and cultural shaping of the Cuban nation.

The CIR established various historical events and dates as commemorations meant to reaffirm the values and principles upon which

our struggle for identity, equality and integration is based.

Thus, on March 22, 2012, the CIR celebrated its civic-cultural, day-long, meeting to mark the International Day against Racial Discrimination, which no official institution even acknowledged. It also presented its 2012 Agenda, which included its main projects and work plans, and a call for participation to help in the delivery of a course titled "The Road to Identity." This course is intended to instruct citizens about the agency of African descendants in our history as a premier contribution, and to reveal the patterns of disdain and invisibilizing that have scourged our national coexistence. This day included an interesting discussion about fundamental issues having to do with the social trauma the majority of at-risk people face in our society, and concluded with a varied cultural program.

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, five CIR leaders were arbitrarily arrested by the political police when they attempted to participate in a commemorative act marking the hundredth anniversary of the PIC massacre, which was organized by the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness].

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, one hundred years after the assassination of PIC leader Evaristo Estenoz, the CIR established the date as the National Day of Homage to the Heroes and Martyrs of the Struggle against Racism, and for Equality

and Justice. More than fifty CIR members and their invitees participated in a moving cultural event that included a discussion about the historical meaning and significance of the PIC.

Supreme among CIR-related matters in 2012 was the fact that it was nominated for the *Premio Rey de España de Derechos Humanos* [King of Spain Human Rights Prize]. The public hearing CIR representatives attended on Sunday, November 4<sup>th</sup>, before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH), of the Organization of American States (OAS), was enormously meaningful. Dr. Darsi Ferrer, a former political prisoner and founder of the CIR; Rafel Campoamor, Director of the NGO *Empoder Cuba*; and, Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado, Vice-President of the *Afro-Cuban Alliance* and Editor-in-Chief of the journal *ISLAS*, were the first representatives of Cuba's civil society to present to the CIDH testimony concerning human rights in Cuba and particularly regarding the multiple problems faced by Cuba's African descendants.

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, the 104<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the PIC and fourth anniversary of the creation of the CIR, members of the *Citizens' Committee* and *ISLAS* family got together to share and reaffirm their commitment to peaceful struggle and systematic work towards achieving the real recognition of the values and rights of Cuba's African descendants.

In an unprecedented event, two CIR leaders—Manuel Cuesta Morúa and Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas—were invited to participate at the 31<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), in 2013. Both scholars will speak on a panel that will analyze core aspects of the race problem in Cuba. They will serve as an alternative Cuban voice at an event that has traditionally been open to mostly intellectual representatives of 'official' Cuba.

The Third Race and Cubanness Forum—Cuba: Past, Present and Future—was held during the last weekend in November. This is

the CIR's premier academic and cultural event. This iteration of it focused on "The Other Family: Black Cubans as Agents in History," and included fourteen presentations that examined the supreme importance of the political, economic, social, intellectual and cultural participation of Cuba's African descendants in the country's shaping and development. Some delved deeply into the contrast there is between that agency and the obstacles and disadvantages that black and *mestizo* Cubans face in their long and difficult search for well-earned and deserved spaces and rights.

Just before the Forum opened, several political police officers approached the CIR leaders to "negotiate" the fact that attendance should be limited to a ridiculously low number of people—20. The CIR leaders rejected this repressive improvisation, whose double intention it was to besmirch their character and avoid a violent attack on the event.

On Friday, November 30<sup>th</sup>, while surrounded by a huge police operation, fifty invitees got together at CIR headquarters to ensure the Forum's inauguration. In his opening words, CIR National Coordinator Juan A. Madrazo reaffirmed its commitment to historical truth and clear, open and unbiased discussion as a supreme contribution to the very necessary energy that the current, complex combination of factors in the struggle for justice and national reconciliation demands.

The winners of the 2012 Tolerancia Plus Awards were announced there—the *Damas de Blanco* [Ladies in White] civic movement, in its general category: filmmaker Gloria Rolando, in its racial category and, Dutchman Kees van Korten Hof, from the NGO *Glasnost in Cuba*, from its chapter dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights (LGBT), which was a first for the organization.

The event closed with an excellent cultural gala that included soprano Yoslainy Pérez, who delighted those present with material from the lyric and popular repertoire of three continents.

She was followed by members of the cultural project known as *Omni Zona Franca*, who offered the audience moving poetry charged with social sensitivity and lyric experimentation. The closing performance was offered in the form of a masterful presentation by a group that preserves Haitian culture in Cuba, *Misterios del Vodú*.

The two-time detention of poet and journalist Guillermo Ordóñez, who is also the Executive Secretary of the *Citizens' Observatory against Racial Discrimination* (OCD), the fact that a number of invitees were not able to attend due to pressure from the police, and the harassment of innocent bystanders, were just a prelude to the escalated repressive measures that were deployed the following morning, Saturday, December 1<sup>st</sup>.

A large group of repressive agents entrenched themselves at the entrance to the CIR's headquarters, essentially to put a stop to the scheduled, day-long, series of presentations and debates. Several CIR leaders were arbitrarily arrested. Juan Antonio Madrazo, Eleanor Calvo, Manuel Cuesta, Fernando Palacio and Leonardo Calvo spent nearly two days in jail cells at different police stations for refusing to give up the ability to exercise their legal rights. That weekend, repressive forces using haughty arrogance like a shield, revealed their panic and weakness when their threats went from seeming dangerous to ridiculous. This happened when they posed as CIR members and tried to confuse the foreign invitees by announcing that the Forum had been cancelled due to rain.

In their "conversations" with some of the detained activists, the political police officers could not hide the fact that the CIR's incorruptible resolve, organizational and intellectual strength, and ability to bring people together, were causing the regime—which has no answer to the race problem—to panic. Forget its sickly preoccupation with the impact and potential of the journal *ISLAS*.

Given the resonating, global, media impact of the Forum's inauguration, its Closing Declaration, and the escalated, repressive attack, CIR leaders have reaffirmed once more their determination to not back away from their commitment to the truth, equality and justice. The Forum's presentations will be discussed at programmed, academic workshops in the months to come.

The CIR crowned one more year of work with significant achievements and accomplishments regarding its clearly defined objectives: to open a path to historical truth, and models of justice and equality; to connect with citizens and communities; and, become more efficiently involved with global movement for the promotion of the rights and values of African descendants.

CIR leaders and members are aware of and proud to know that each success or step forward is also supported by the unconditional commitment and solidarity of brethren and contributors who, although distant, move to the rhythm of the CIR's dynamics and challenges. Without the sensitivity and support of Professor Carlos Moore, the *National Cimarron Movement* in Colombia, the *Afro-Cuban Alliance* and the *ISLAS* team, our work would be extremely difficult and incomplete.

Seeing how the disadvantages and despair of our relegated and excluded brethren increases each day, realizing how the regime's political will in dealing with the race problem boils down to only words (because its actions reflect nothing more than a racism, indolence and intolerance that demagoguery cannot obscure), and understanding how much those of us who share sensitivity and a commitment to promoting the equality and justice that has for so long been denied Cuba's African descendants, moves us to begin this new work year convinced of the fact that right is on our side.