

Cuba's Alarcón blames U.S. for jailings

The speaker of Cuba's National Assembly answered questions at a Hispanic journalists conference via satellite from Havana.

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It promised to be a face-off to ignite journalistic fireworks: prominent New York Times journalist Mirta Ojito grilling Ricardo Alarcón, the speaker of Cuba's National Assembly, at the Hispanic journalists convention in Fort Lauderdale Wednesday.

But while Ojito did ask questions that at times left the usually loquacious Alarcón fumbling for words and made him squirm, he said almost nothing that has not already been heard before from Cuban government officials.

Even when asked why Cuba has more journalists in prison than any other country in the hemisphere, Alarcón managed to blame the United States. He went on to assert that civil rights are not abused in Cuba, Cuba's socialist system trumps U.S. capitalism, and Cuba's black population is well represented in the upper echelons of Cuba's government.

Alarcón gave his most passionate response when asked what role Cuban exiles will play in a post-Castro Cuba. He first said he looks forward to hostility ending between Washington and the Cuban government, so that Cubans can reunite. But he delivered a warning to exiles seeking to influence the Cuban government.

"There are some people who are still thinking in coming back to Cuba to recover their island, to recover their land, to recover their houses, to recover their properties, to govern us as representative of the U.S. government," Alarcón said. "For that kind of people, I assure you, I swear to you, they will never have absolutely any role in this country again."

Alarcón spoke to the National Association of Hispanic Journalists via satellite from CNN's Havana bureau. Wearing a dark suit, he sat with Havana's skyline and

shore as a backdrop. He spoke in accented English, but with enough eloquence to get his point across without resorting to Spanish.

Ojito delivered tough questions from the moment she finished her brief greeting to the moment the satellite connection was cut an hour later. She began by asking Alarcón about the lack of press freedom in Cuba.

"Why do you continue to suppress freedom of the press in Cuba?" she said.

Alarcón called the reports Ojito was citing "inaccurate" and went on to blame the U.S. government for trying to promote anti-revolutionary "propaganda" in Cuba.

'HOSTILE CAMPAIGN'

"I think it is important to separate fact from fiction," he said. ``Cuba has been for a long time, for 47 years, subject to a hostile campaign by the U.S. government that has always included propaganda."

He then flashed a document, which he claimed was a declassified CIA report that he said proved the agency had spent money every year since the 1959 revolution to pay journalists in Cuba. "The point is very simple," he said. ``Cuba has a right to protect its independence."

Ojito listed several imprisoned journalists in Cuba, and asked ``What was their crime?"

"They were working for the U.S. government," Alarcón said.

At one point, Alarcón seemed taken aback after Ojito asked who would be Cuba's enemy if the U.S. embargo suddenly were lifted, and whether he would allow debate and dissent.

"Cuba, of course, would make its own decisions," he said.

When speaking of black representation in Cuba's government, which has been labeled by some human-rights groups as an apartheid-style regime that gives

Cuba's black population no real positions of power, Alarcón said, "you have people that are blacker than my suit" in positions of power in Cuban institutions.

"Cuba is a civilized nation, it has a constitution, it has laws, please do not believe those propaganda ideas that we are backward," Alarcón told the hundreds of journalists gathered at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts. Ojito, a former Miami Herald reporter who went on to write for The New York Times, now teaches a journalism class at Columbia University in New York. Last year, she published a book, *Finding Mañana*, a critically acclaimed nonfiction account of the Mariel Boatlift in 1980. Ojito, who was born in Cuba, came to the United States on the boatlift.

EXILES GATHER

Representatives of several anti-Castro exile groups gathered outside the performing arts center in a show of solidarity with jailed journalists on the island. They held poster boards that highlighted the lack of press freedom in Cuba, with phrases such as "second largest number of jailed journalists in the world" and with photographs of Cuban independent journalist Guillermo Fariñas, who is in critical condition after being on a hunger strike for several months to demand free access to the Internet.

Manuel Vasquez Portal, an independent journalist who went into exile after being released from prison in 2004, was outside the venue wearing a Fariñas T-shirt.

"I'm free for one reason: because the groups outside didn't forget about me and fought for the government to free me," Vasquez Portal said. "Now it's my turn to plead for my colleagues on the island."