

Statement from Cuba's Ladies in White

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A translation of an excerpt from a statement issued Monday by Miriam Leiva, founding member of the Ladies in White group:

On Aug. 7, as on every Sunday since March 30, 2003, the Ladies in White attended church at the Santa Rita de Casia Church and walked down the middle of Fifth Avenue in Miramar, Havana. But this wasn't an ordinary Sunday. It was the Sunday after the provisional delegation of power by Fidel Castro to Raúl Castro and five other Cuban leaders.

This movement of the Cuban civil society does not have a political nature, ideological preferences or confessional exclusions. We do not challenge and we're not a party. We have neither a spokeswoman nor a hierarchy. We are the voices of the 75 innocent prisoners of conscience, imprisoned during the Black Spring of 2003, and our families. We have suffered much, but we harbor neither hatred nor resentment.

If anything has become evident this week, it's that the government of Cuba must open itself to its people and simultaneously to the world. The inner fear can be smelled, can be felt on the empty streets of Havana and in cities and towns all over the country. . . . The quiet and timorous commentaries do not match the noisy and fun-loving idiosyncrasy [of the Cuban people].

But the causes of this unreal calm make no one feel comfortable in the stillness and near absence of the habitual sounds. It's as if everyone had come to a halt, astonished. We have felt the surveillance, and sensed the repressive elements preparing to act at the slightest signal.

Cuba will never again be the same. The people deserve the right to express themselves without fear, to know what's happening, to contribute their opinions, to participate in the decisions, to really be the masters of their fate, to help our homeland to recover economically and join the international commonwealth.

One of the first steps has to be the release of the 75 prisoners of conscience, those people sentenced unjustly in March 2003 to terms of up to 28 years; the 60 who are in prison and the 12 who have been released on parole for reasons of health and remain in the country; as well as the release of the other peaceful prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, including those who have been awaiting charges and trials since July 2005.

We Ladies in White aspire to live in liberty and democracy. We miss the respect for our rights and the peace among us all. These have been very important issues for Cubans for centuries now, an importance that was evidenced in the outstanding role played by Cuba in the drafting of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, and many other examples.

We shall not give up in our efforts, and even though we are unprotected women, we are filled with immense tenacity and passion for our relatives, our people and our homeland. Not always will there be many of us; everyone knows the many difficulties that exist in our country and the repression against us all. But every Sunday, and whenever it's opportune, we shall be together and will surely redouble our efforts to participate.

This seventh day of August, we walked with our traditional gladiolus in one hand and white lilies in the other, as signs of peace and love. We shall continue to struggle, because we are convinced that nothing is impossible if reason is on our side.

Havana, Aug. 8, 2006