

Jail would be better than harassment, dissident says

Life in Cuba has 'become just about impossible,' said activist Martha Beatriz Roque. She claims she has been harassed steadily since the transfer of power on the island.

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HAVANA - Activist Martha Beatriz Roque has an unusual request for the Cuban government: stop the harassment or send her back to jail.

The former political prisoner, who has opposed leader Fidel Castro for 17 years, says she can no longer endure the threats and insults by government supporters, who yell at her when she walks down the street and slip menacing notes under her door. Last weekend, they banged a pistol against her window in the middle of the night.

"This life has become just about impossible," Roque, one of Cuba's most high-profile dissidents, told The Associated Press in her small Havana apartment Tuesday. "I would rather be behind bars than dealing with this constant harassment."

JAILED IN 2003

Roque, an economist, was the lone woman among 75 people imprisoned in spring 2003 under a government crackdown on dissent. Given a 20-year sentence, she was released on parole for health reasons in July 2004.

In May 2005, she organized an unprecedented gathering of more than 200 dissidents to discuss promotion of a Western-style democracy in Cuba. James Cason, chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, was among numerous diplomats who attended.

Roque said pressure has been building since July 2005, when Castro lashed out at opponents in his annual rebellion day speech, calling them "traitors" and "mercenaries" paid by the U.S. government. She said harassment has been steady since July 31, when Castro announced he was ceding power to his younger brother Raúl while he recovered from intestinal surgery.

The slender, gray-haired 61-year-old suffers from diabetes as well as heart and blood-pressure problems.

"Are they doing this to give me a heart attack?" she asked half-jokingly.

The worst came in April, when she said she was repeatedly punched and slapped by a man and woman who rushed into her front room as she tried to leave her apartment. That month, a group of people who had recently moved into nearby units in her building spent a weekend painting the Cuban flag and fiery slogans in the passageway to her home.

CASTRO PORTRAIT

The wall still reads "Long Live Fidel" and "Down with the Counterrevolutionaries." And every time Roque opens her door, she's greeted with a huge portrait of Castro, hung by his supporters.

"This has been an offensive with no end," she said.

Roque says she suspects that state security agents are among her new neighbors.

"Put me in a prison cell, where no one can bother me," said Roque, who sent letters to the island's Justice and Interior ministries in May asking the government to either stop the aggressive acts or put her back in jail. "I'm willing to make that sacrifice, to show the world that it's impossible to live in Cuba."