

Acts of civil protest on the rise in Cuba, report says

A new report by the Cuban Democratic Directorate shows the number of acts of civil disobedience on the island is on the rise, revealing growing discontent with the quality of life in Cuba.

The Miami Herald
Nov. 30, 2006

From candlelight vigils to hunger strikes and even a mountain hike, Fidel Castro opponents logged more than 3,300 acts of civil disobedience in Cuba last year, nearly twice the number of the year before, according to a report to be released today.

As Castro's government continues a campaign of reprisals against dissidents that began with a wave of arrests three years ago, members of the opposition movement say more people are speaking up and joining up.

"Repression generates rebellion," said Janisset Rivero, executive director of the Cuban Democratic Directorate, an exile organization that published Steps to Freedom, to be released tonight at the University of Miami.

The report's numbers underscore growing discontent with the quality of life in Cuba, and the government's inability to satisfy basic needs. And while the government's 2003 crackdown decapitated much of the dissident movement, each year the number of acts of civil resistance climbs, the report said. Among the group's findings:

- The central province of Villa Clara appears to be a hotbed of political opposition, logging far more protests than any other province. Even though nearly all of the island's internationally known dissident activists live in Havana, only 11 percent of last year's civil disobedience took place there.
- 25 hunger strikes were held by prisoners.
- The Ladies in White, the group of female relatives of the 75 political prisoners picked up in the 2003 sweep, held 182 different protests.
- The 3,322 acts logged in 2005 -- including 2,613 vigils -- represent an 85 percent increase over the 1,805 acts of civil disobedience in 2004.

`LOSING THEIR FEAR'

"What we're seeing is a direct relation between the incapacity of the regime's administration -- economically, politically, the errors they commit every day -- and the discontent of the people," Rivero said. ``People see no hope, but they are losing their fear."

The Directorate helps pro-democracy organizations on the island. It receives a portion of its funding, some \$1 million, from the U.S. Agency for International Development. The USAID money goes to a project, separate from the civil disobedience report, that focuses on outreach.

The Directorate's federal funding has made it a frequent object of criticism from the Cuban government. The report has come out annually since 1997, documenting each reported act of disobedience by date and address and citing the source. When it began a decade ago, the listing was of a scant 44 events. That more than doubled to 100 events in 1998, eventually jumping to 1,328 in 2003.

"The opposition has taken a lower profile since July 2005, when Fidel Castro incited violence against us in a speech he gave," said Eliécer Consuegra Rivas, of the Eastern Democratic Alliance in Holguín. 'But as that happens, horizons broaden. The police will loot an independent library, and people on the street come forward and say, `How are they going to take the books?' "

Cuban dissident leaders say they lost momentum when the 75 were jailed, but have since overcome the leadership loss.

"The 2003 wave was a big blow to the opposition," said Juan Carlos González Leiva, a Ciego de Avila activist who was jailed for two years for heading the Cuban Human Rights Foundation. ``It decapitated the movement, so that now we have opposition members leaving the country and being jailed. But there are two sides to that: we lose people to jail and exile, but those people have friends and family who join the ranks."

LACK OF FUNDING

He said the opposition movement is stymied by a lack of funding and materials. The issue has been a sticking point for the Bush administration, which last year pledged to provide dissidents an additional \$80 million.

But U.S. law prohibits AID from sending cash, and Cuban law prohibits dissidents from receiving it.

González cut the conversation short when he said the pro-government mob throwing rocks at the home of another dissident where González was using the phone had set the roof on fire. Reached later, he said a few pails of water put out the fire.