

# Report finds fewer dissidents in prison

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**HAVANA** - (AP) -- The number of political prisoners held in Cuba dropped in the second half of last year, but harassment of dissidents continues, a veteran human rights activist said Tuesday.

Elizardo Sánchez of the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation said in his twice-yearly update that his group counted 283 prisoners of conscience, down from 316 in early July.

The commission counted 333 political prisoners in Cuba a year ago.

Sánchez attributed the drop to "selective" releases of prisoners, like Héctor Palacios, an opposition leader who was recently set free on medical parole.

He was one of 75 dissidents arrested in a crackdown in 2003. Fifteen of those arrested have since been freed for health reasons.

But Sánchez said that even as some prisoners have been released, Cuba's communist-run government continues to harass dissidents with short detentions, interrogations and monitoring.

The rights activist also said he had no hope for a major change under Raúl Castro, the defense minister named acting president when his older brother, Fidel Castro, stepped aside in late July after intestinal surgery.

Cuba's government denies holding prisoners of conscience, characterizing them as common criminals.

Rights activists count on family members and others to bring cases to their attention.