

Group: Fewer political prisoners in Cuba

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HAVANA --

The number of political prisoners in Cuba has dropped by more than 20 percent since Raul Castro took over from his ailing elder brother, but widespread repression has continued, a leading independent human rights group said Thursday.

"Still in force is a police state whose nature is reflected in almost every aspect of national life," the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation said in a report.

Raul Castro, the 76-year-old defense minister, has led the country since his 80-year-old brother Fidel temporarily stepped aside in July 2006 following intestinal surgery. Since then, Cuba has seen no major political or economic changes.

The commission, whose reports are regularly used by international groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, said 246 political prisoners were being held as of June 30, compared with 283 at the beginning of 2007 and 316 a year ago.

The commission operates independently of the government and without its approval, but has been largely tolerated. Even during a government crackdown on the opposition in March 2003, the commission continued to operate, providing information to international news media and human rights groups about the arrests and trials.

Its list of those remaining behind bars includes 13 people who have been released on medical parole, including well-known government critic Martha Beatriz Roque and economics writer Oscar Espinosa Chepe. The commission says it continues to list them because they could be returned to prison at any time for parole violations.

The commission said it remains "inexplicable" that political prisoners continue to be held "in one of the countries with the least political violence on the planet."

"Our vision for the future is pessimistic, at least in the short term," activists Elizardo Sanchez and Carlos Menendez wrote in a statement accompanying the report. "The situation concerning civil, political, economic and cultural rights will continue the same, or even worsen, unless there is some kind of political miracle in Cuba."

The commission's list includes prisoners convicted of violent acts, such as Salvadorans Otto Rene Rodriguez Llerena and Raul Ernesto Cruz Leon, sentenced to death for terrorism in the bombings of Havana hotels that killed an Italian tourist.

Also named is Hector Eladio Real Suarez, a member of a Miami-based exile group who in 1996 was sentenced to death for killing a Cuban official when he and six other men tried to infiltrate the island.