

Cuban dissident backs political amnesty

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HAVANA --

Dissident Oswaldo Paya asked Cuba's parliament on Tuesday to approve an amnesty for political prisoners and to allow Cubans to leave and visit the island without government visas.

Paya and another activist, Minervo Lazaro Chil, turned up at the National Assembly offices and hand-delivered "citizens' petitions" on both matters.

Legislative workers quietly registered the proposals according to protocol. Several men with walkie-talkies who routinely shadow Paya rushed inside the building at one point, but made no effort to stop the proceedings.

"This is a petition made on human terms, not political terms," Paya said to international reporters just outside parliament, drawing stares from a small group of neighbors and residents who gathered to see watch the makeshift news conference.

One proposal called for the release of all "nonviolent" prisoners of conscience, many of whom Paya said are in failing health.

According to the Havana-based Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, an opposition group that the government does not recognize but tolerates, 246 political prisoners are held in Cuban prisons, down from 283 in July 2006, when 81-year-old Fidel Castro fell ill and ceded power to a provisional government headed by his younger brother Raul.

The second proposal would eliminate the government permits Cubans now need to leave or enter their homeland and would abolish a migration law that restricts travel within Cuba in an attempt to prevent people from flooding into large cities.

Paya won the European Union's 2002 Sakharov Prize for the Varela Project, a petition that gathered 25,000 signatures asking for a referendum on changes to Cuba's electoral law and guarantees of rights including freedom of speech and assembly and private business ownership.

It was seen as the most extensive homegrown, nonviolent effort to push for reforms in Cuba's one-party system since the older Castro took power in 1959.

The communist-led legislature ruled it unconstitutional and the government responded with its own petition drive to declare socialism an "irrevocable" part of the constitution.

Paya said he hopes legislators will take up his latest proposals when the National Assembly holds its year-end session, which has not yet been formally scheduled.

The legislature's 614 members meet twice a year in brief sessions that usually quickly endorse government proposals.

