

# Imprisoned Castro critic honored by Bush

## President Bush will give jailed dissident leader Oscar Biscet an award for his rights work in Cuba.

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WASHINGTON --

Oscar Elías Biscet, a Cuban dissident who has spent much of the past decade in prison and is one of Fidel Castro's harshest and best-known critics, is to receive a Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded by President Bush, the White House announced Monday.

Confined to a Cuban maximum security prison since 2003, Biscet was one of eight people awarded the presidential medal -- the highest U.S. government award given to a civilian, along with the Congressional Gold Medal.

The other winners included Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Harper Lee, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Biscet's outspoken ways and his multiple trips to jail have made the Afro-Cuban physician one of the most prominent opponents of the island's communist government. He started protesting as a recent medical graduate in 1986, when he denounced the long hours doctors had to work without pay, and in one stretch between June 1998 and November 1999 was arrested 26 times.

According to his wife, Elsa Morejón, Biscet is being held in the maximum security Combinado del Este prison in Havana. He is confined to a cell with no mattress, no light or chair and family visits are allowed once every three months.

Biscet suffers from high blood pressure, joint pain and failing eyesight, she has said.

In a phone conversation from Havana, Morejón thanked Bush for the award and called it "a recognition of our political prisoners."

"It is important that in this world someone remembers us," she said.

The White House announcement called Biscet "a champion in the fight against tyranny and oppression."

Miami Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said it was a "victory for the Cuban people as this medal will shine a bright light on the barbaric way in which the Castro regime treats its political prisoners."

Ros-Lehtinen had lobbied the White House to give the medal to Biscet. The award ceremony is scheduled for Nov. 5.

Bush mentioned Biscet in a speech last week, where he cited Cuba's human rights record to justify his continued tough stance against the Castro government.

In 1997, Biscet founded the Lawton Foundation of Human Rights, which denounced rights abuses in Cuba and campaigns for democracy.

The bearded Biscet considers himself a follower of Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama and Gandhi, and in the summer of 1999 he organized a liquids-only hunger strike against the Cuban government.

That year, he was kicked out of the Cuban National Health System, making it impossible him to work as a physician.

He was sentenced to three years for public disorder, "inciting delinquent behavior" and displaying the Cuban flag upside down.

Amnesty International pronounced him a prisoner of conscience.

Biscet was released in late 2002 and then, just over a month later, he was arrested again, as part of a crackdown on dissent. He was sentenced to 25 years for being a threat to the state.

Besides Biscet, Johnson Sirleaf and Lee, other winners are former Rep. Henry J. Hyde, economist Gary Becker, geneticist Francis S. Collins, U.S. civil rights activist Benjamin L. Hooks and C-SPAN founder Brian P. Lamb.

Past recipients of the award include Pope John Paul II and Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi.

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