

Human rights march interrupted

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HAVANA --

Cuba said Monday it would sign an international agreement on civil and political rights while a few blocks away government supporters shoved and shouted down activists calling for improved human rights on the communist-run island.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque marked International Human Rights Day with word his country would "soon" sign the accords. Meanwhile, dissidents marching nearby were mobbed, insulted and forced into unmarked sedans.

There were no reports of injuries, and it was not clear whether marchers taken away had been arrested. A few international journalists were roughed up by counter-protesters, but did not require medical attention.

Several march organizers were picked up before the event, evidently in an attempt to prevent it, according to a caller who identified himself as Carlos Bosch, communications secretary of the Independent Democrat Front.

The scene at a park in the Vedado neighborhood was similar to International Human Rights Day protests in past years. Only 14 protesters turned up, and they were shouted down and pushed by a pro-government group of more than 100 people, guided by men with walkie-talkies.

What was different this year was Perez Roque's announcement Cuba would sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the first quarter of next year. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, the two covenants develop the ideas in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Cuba is a signatory.

Susan McDade, resident coordinator for the United Nations in Cuba, welcomed the announcement as "extremely positive."

Perez Roque also characterized the U.S. military prison for terror suspects in Guantanamo as a "torture camp" and demanded that the property on the island's easternmost tip be immediately returned to Cuba.

It was unclear if the signing of the documents would mark a change in Cuba's treatment of dissidents, who are typically characterized as "mercenaries" paid by the United States to undermine the island's communist system.

Both the dissidents and U.S. authorities regularly reject those charges.

U.S. officials did not comment on Cuba's announcement at a reception Monday at the home of Michael Parmly, chief of the U.S. Interests Section - the American mission here.

"The people of Cuba know that it will take change to throw off the shackles of petrified ideology and create a different future of themselves," Parnly told several hundred guests, including many of the island's leading dissidents. "Democracies welcome change, despots fear it."

While Perez Roque spoke, dozens of people in plain clothes assembled in the nearby park, anticipating the protest that began when a veteran activist, Dr. Darsi Ferrer, locked arms with four others and marched silently along the park's perimeter. Their ranks eventually grew to 14.

The counter-protesters shouted "traitors!" and "mercenaries!" and occasionally shoved them. "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" the counter protesters chanted, in support of ailing leader Fidel Castro.

When government supporters started to get rough, several young men who appeared to be leading the counter-protest called them off, saying, "Easy, comrades, easy. Don't hit. Don't push. That's what they want."

At least five people - including Ferrer and his wife - were pushed into cars.

A man and woman clung to one another as they walked five blocks from the park while pro-government activists pushed and tried to grab the couple.

"I'm a Spanish citizen and I'm being mistreated!" cried the man, using his arms to protect the terrified woman. The pair were eventually forced into an unmarked sedan.

Cuba maintains that it respects human rights better than most countries by providing its people with a broad social safety net that includes free medical care, low-cost food and heavily subsidized utilities and other services.

In a related incident, about 15 foreign women, most of them Spaniards, were being expelled from Cuba after participating in the regular Sunday march of the Ladies in White, a Cuban group which gathers every Sunday to demand the release of their imprisoned husbands and other relatives.

"They have told us that we have to leave," said Spaniard Laura Costa, adding that authorities had seized their passports and were booking them on flights off the island Monday.

Cuba has not commented on the expulsions.