

NEWS RELEASE

EMBARGO until

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PROMINENT BLACK AMERICANS CONDEMN CUBA'S CRACKDOWN ON BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS

In a landmark "Statement of Conscience by African Americans," 60 prominent black American scholars, artists and professionals have condemned the Cuban regime's stepped-up harassment and apparent crackdown on the country's budding civil rights movement. This statement is the first public condemnation of racial conditions in Cuba made by black Americans.

Traditionally, African Americans have sided with the Castro regime and condemned the United States' policies, which explicitly work to topple the Cuban government. Yet this landmark statement by prominent African Americans condemns the growing persecution waged by the Cuban government against Afro-Cuban movements.

It warns: "Racism in Cuba, and anywhere else in the world, is unacceptable and must be confronted."

It also denounces the "callous disregard" for the "most marginalized people on the island."

The statement is signed by scholar and Princeton University professor Cornel West; famed actress Ruby Dee; former Essence magazine editor and current president of the National CARES Mentoring Movement Susan Taylor; Bennett College President Julianne Malveaux; UCLA Vice Chancellor Claudia Mitchell-Kernan; Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ's pastor emeritus, Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright; former Black Panther activist Kathleen Cleaver; retired Congresswoman Carrie Meek; professor emeritus University of Maryland College Park and Rev. Jesse Jackson presidential campaign manager Ron Walters; and film director Melvin Van Peebles.

The statement also calls for the "immediate release" of Dr. Darsi Ferrer, one of black Cuba's most prominent imprisoned civil rights leaders who has been on a hunger strike to bring attention to the crisis. A physician, Ferrer has angered Cuban authorities by setting up independent "people's clinics" housed in private homes and garages to attend to the growing numbers of impoverished blacks who no longer receive medical attention from the state. Ferrer was jailed on criminal charges four months ago and consigned to a maximum security prison for common criminals in the outskirts of Cuba's capital Havana.

The U.S. State Department estimates Afro-Cubans make up 62 percent of the Cuban population, with many informed observers saying the figure is closer to 70 percent.

Afro-Cubans are experiencing strong and growing instances of racism on the island, with their 25-odd civil rights movements reporting a wide-range of discriminatory practices in hiring, promotion and access to Cuba's socialized medicine and educational system.

Young black Cubans bitterly complain of aggressive racial profiling conducted by police, and Cuba's jail population is estimated to be 85 percent black, according to black Cuban civil rights activists. Some 70 percent of Afro-Cubans are said to be unemployed.

In such conditions, a vigorous rebirth of Cuba's black movement, banned in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, is occurring. Cuban authorities are responding with violence and brutal civil rights violations.

