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Cuba releases pro-life activist

Victor Gaetan Catholic News Service | Mar. 17, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Cuba released a renowned pro-life activist and political dissident, but sent mixed signals the next day when courts sentenced an American contractor to 15 years in prison for taking telecommunications equipment into the country.

Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, 49, an activist first jailed in 1999 for denouncing Fidel Castro's abortion policies, was released from prison March 11, as announced by the Archdiocese of Havana, which has negotiated the release of 52 political prisoners since last summer. He was also among a group of 75 activists jailed in anti-government protests in 2003.

Upon his release, he told EFE, the Spanish news agency, that he intends to stay in Cuba.

"I've always lived in Cuba and I am of Cuba," he said. "I haven't ever harmed anybody, just given love, much love, and because of that I was harmed by the government."

In a teleconference from Havana March 14, Biscet signaled his intention to remain critical of the government, calling the Castro regime a "total dictatorship" that fears informed citizens.

He called on fellow Cubans to "act moderately, impartially, and with firmness in the defense of our principles without falling into sectarian extremism, but always intransigent in regards to liberty, justice, and democracy for Cuba."

Political analyst and blogger Alberto de la Cruz told Catholic News Service, "Oscar Biscet is Cuba's Nelson Mandela. He has the charisma to lead a democracy movement."

De la Cruz, who helped organize the teleconference, described Biscet as "exhausted but in good spirits. He's been in solitary confinement for most of the last eight years. He's been living in an eight-by-four-foot cell. So suddenly being home is overwhelming."

Biscet first came to the attention of communist authorities when he investigated abortion techniques and discovered that in his hospital, abortionists were killing babies born alive. In 1998, Biscet lost his job, as did his wife, Elsa Morejon Hernandez, a nurse. They were evicted from their house and, in 1999, he was arrested and sentenced to three years in jail for disorderly conduct. After his release, he was arrested again.

As part of government sweeps of anti-Castro activists in 2003, he was again arrested and sentenced to 25 years. Many of the group were part of an initiative known as the Varela Project, named after 19th-century priest, Father Felix Varela, an anti-slavery activist who petitioned the Spanish monarchy for Latin American independence.

Of those imprisoned in 2003, just three remain imprisoned. Some of the original 75 were released earlier for health reasons and others completed their sentences.

Most of those set free since July under the church-negotiated agreement went initially to Spain. Some of them are in the process of relocating to the United States, where most have family. Biscet and eight others have been allowed to stay in Cuba.

Biscet was honored for his work by President George W. Bush in 2007 with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Family members attended the White House ceremony in his name.

The day after Biscet's release, American Alan Gross was sentenced to 15 years in prison after his conviction for subversive activities. He has been jailed since his December 2009 arrest at Havana's international airport for taking satellite communications equipment into the country. A contracting agency for the U.S. Agency for International Development sponsored Gross's work, and he had been to the country several times on similar missions, entering with a tourist visa.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is among those who have decried Gross' treatment.

The Archdiocese of Havana also announced the release and transfer to Spain of nine other prisoners who were not a part of the 2003 group of dissidents but had been charged with crimes, including piracy, terrorism, defiance of authority, public disorder and illegal departure from the island. The men included some members of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation.

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