

The Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, May. 20, 2013

Ladies in White say they want both material and moral support

By Juan Carlos Chavez and Juan O. Tamayo
jtamayo@EINuevoHerald.com



PEDRO PORTAL

Miami Dade College President Dr. Eduardo Padron presented a group of Cuban dissidents, Damas de Blanco, Ladies in White, - from left- Laura Maria Labrada, Berta Soler and Belkis Cantillo, with the MDC Presidential Medal, during an event to honor their fight for Cuban democracy at The Freedom Tower in downtown Miami on Monday, May 20, 2013.

Leaders of Cuba's dissident Ladies in White group rejected Havana's claims they are mercenaries and said on Monday that there is nothing wrong with receiving help from abroad because the Cuban government "is trying to asphyxiate us."

Berta Soler and Belkis Cantillo also called for forgiveness of low-level repressors in a post-Castro era but punishment for those "with blood on their hands" during an appearance at the Freedom Tower, symbolic heart of Miami's exile community, on Cuba's traditional Independence Day.

Soler, Cantillo and Laura Labrada got louder and longer applause than even Miami's own Gloria Estefan, who wore a white dress and presented the women with a large photo of the massive march she

helped organize in Miami in 2010 to support their group.

The audience of several hundred at the Freedom Tower broke repeatedly into applause and shouts of "Viva Cuba" as the three women, also dressed in white, laid out their thoughts on the communist-run island of 11 million people.

Cantillo said that as a Christian she could forgive the young State Security agent who punched and shoved her to break up a protest last month by several members of the Ladies in White in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba.

Soler said, however, that in a democratic Cuba "those with blood on their hands must go on trial." She gave no details, but Cubans often point to the boats that rammed and sank the tugboat "13 de Marzo" in 1994 to keep it from escaping the island. More than 30 people aboard the tugboat drowned.

Soler and Labrada also repeated their pleas for material and moral assistance for the Ladies in White and other dissidents, rejecting Cuban government allegations that Washington finances their activities to undermine the communist system.

“We are not paid. We are not mercenaries,” said Labrada. “And we are grateful for all of those who want to help us.”

Soler added that the dissidents need “oxygen” because the Cuban government “wants to asphyxiate us,” often by denying jobs, educational benefits and other government services to opposition activists and relatives.

Journalist Maria Elvira Salazar, who moderated the presentation, noted in a question that Havana received huge subsidies from the Soviet Union and Venezuela and supported guerrillas in almost every Latin American country during the 1960s and 70s.

The public presentation was hosted by the Foundation for Human rights in Cuba and Miami Dade College to coincide with May 20, celebrated as Cuba’s Independence Day until Fidel Castro seized power. The government now celebrates independence on Oct. 10, the start in 1868 of the revolt against Spain.

“We never would have imagined being here to celebrate this day,” said Soler, one of the dozen dissidents allowed to travel abroad for the first time in years after the government eased its travel restrictions in January.

Dissident Guillermo Fariñas — who like the Ladies in White won the European Parliament’s Sakharov prize for Freedom of Conscience, his coming in 2010, the women’s in 2005 — took part in a news conference with the women before the public presentation.

Fariñas acknowledged with a sheepish smile that when he arrived in Miami he was a bit worried about his reception by some of the “more radical” Miami Cubans, because of the Cuban government’s 50 years of propaganda against exiles.

But he said he received “a lot of affection” when he turned up over the weekend at Cuba Nostalgia, the annual celebration of all things Cuba, and when he stopped for a bite to eat at Versailles, the Calle Ocho restaurant.

MDC President Eduardo J. Padron said the Ladies in White had shown “an extraordinary valor” in their activism against the government and presented the women with the college’s Presidential Medal, engraved “Guardians of Freedom.”

Jorge Mas Santos, head of the Cuban American National Foundation, said the dissidents live under terrible threats but “are the hope for a country where human rights are respected and the dreams of a young Cuban can be realized.” The Ladies in White and Fariñas were scheduled to be guests of honor Monday night at the Foundation’s annual 20 de Mayo Celebration Dinner at the JW Marriott Marquis in downtown Miami