

## CUBA

### Ricardo González Alfonso



Due for release in 2023

#### Job

Director of the Manuel Márquez Sterling Association, editor of the bimonthly *De Cuba*, Reporters Without Borders correspondent.

#### Date of arrest

18 March 2003.

#### Sentence

20 years in prison, handed down on 4 April 2003 by Havana's 10 October municipal court. The prosecutor requested life imprisonment.

#### Reasons for detention

He was convicted under article 91 of the criminal code, which punishes anyone acting in the interests of a foreign country to the detriment of Cuban independence or territorial integrity with between 10 and 20 years in jail or the death penalty. Under article 53, he was also accused of:

- " Acting in a group of three or more people;
- " Acting for profit or for any other base or frivolous reason;
- " Actions that had serious consequences;
- " Committing an offence after an official warning by the authorities.

The indictment also stressed the social danger of the offences and motives of the accused, namely monetary greed and a wish for an easy life. He was accused of being in the pay of the United States.

#### Place of detention

The infirmary at the Combinado del Este prison (Havana), where he was taken in December 2004.

#### Conditions of detention

He is being held in harsh conditions. He is currently alone in a cell awaiting transfer to an area where common criminals are held. His wife says he is in good spirits, even though suffering from allergies due to temperature changes and unhygienic conditions. He does not complain. They have imprisoned me with my optimism, he told his wife in June 2003.

On 6 November, he and two other dissidents were transferred to a wing containing common law prisoners. The transfer may however lead to improvements, such as being

allowed to have meals with others, exercise outdoors and receive visits once every 45 days instead of every three months.

He began a hunger-strike on 8 December to protest against being kept with common criminals and demanded to be at least imprisoned with less aggressive ones. Fellow inmates had twice stolen his belongings. He was transferred on 14 December to a dimly-lit cell to punish his misbehaviour, according to a prison official. He ended his hunger-strike on 24 December after getting a satisfactory response to his demands, according to his wife.

Since the April 2004 meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, he has been able to phone his wife once a week, on a Monday. This had not been possible since July 2003. The authorities had said the phone was broken.

Viso Bello visited her husband on 20 May and reported he was still being held in a cell with common prisoners and only allowed one visit every three months and a conjugal visit every five. He was in good spirits. He decided not to have an operation to remove a cyst on his throat since it was not malignant. She said he spent most of his time reading and was allowed to watch TV in the evening.

On 27 July, he was taken to the prisoner's ward of the Amalia Simoni hospital in Camagüey with hepatitis. His wife could not get any more information from the hospital because the phone lines were apparently down.

He was transferred to the infirmary of Aguica prison (Matanzas province) on 11 August. His wife was able to visit him on 20 August and reported that his health had improved, though he had hepatitis.

A family member told Reporters Without Borders on 23 November that he had received treatment for hepatitis and was now convalescing in the infirmary. After the family's last visit, in October, his youngest son said his father seemed to have lost weight. His family was worried because he had started smoking again.

He had an operation to remove gallstones on 13 January 2005. His wife Alida was allowed to visit him later two days later at the infirmary of the Combinado del Este prison, where he had been having treatment since the previous month. She said he was in good spirits.

Officials confiscated four copies of the dissident magazine *Revista Hispano Cubana* (published in Spain) that his wife brought for him when she visited him at Combinado del Este on 27 April. She said a guard told her she could not take them in. She was forced to sign a receipt when they were seized.

He had a medical exam at the infirmary on 4 May that showed he had a staphylococcus infection and would need antibiotics. His wife reported on 30 June that he was going to have another operation, to remove an inflamed tumour, and that surgeons feared the growth of fistula would complicate the operation. Cubanet reported on 5 November that he was due to have the operation very soon.

Ricardo González Alfonso had a third surgical operation on 18 December - his second within one month - at the hospital in Combinado del Este prison in Havana, his wife, Alida Viso has said. The operation was to re-stitch an incision made during the second operation on 2 December which had failed to close up properly. The Reporters Without Borders correspondent was slightly unwell the following day, due to a drop in blood pressure. He remains on the convalescence wing.

### **Circumstances of arrest**

A dozen police searched his house for 11 hours when he was arrested and seized mostly items used to produce *De Cuba*, including a Panasonic fax/telephone, a tape-recorder, typewriters, two radios, a camera, a movie camera, two computers (one of them a laptop), a scanner, a printer, several CD-ROMs, audio and video cassettes, books, address books and many

supposedly subversive documents.

### **Trial**

In Havana on 4 April 2003 at a single hearing, together with Raúl Rivero. Foreign journalists and diplomats were barred. Only his wife and Rivero's wife, Blanca Reyes, were allowed to attend.

He was accused of being an agent of the US interests section in Havana, meeting with its head, James Cason, holding subversive meetings at his home and writing against the government.

Two of the five prosecution witnesses called were prominent independent journalists who said they were in fact state security agents who had infiltrated the dissidents. They were Manuel David Orrio, until then head of the Cooperativa de Periodistas Independientes (CPI), and Néstor Baguer, head of the Asociación de Periodistas Independientes de Cuba (APIC) for more than 10 years. Baguer also contributed to *De Cuba*. Orrio accused González of being in the pay of the United States. Three neighbours also testified, accusing him of organising subversive meetings at his home.

He was accused of writing tendentious articles in the quarterly review *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, published in Spain, and in the Miami-based daily *El Nuevo Herald*. The prosecution described the former as financed by the United States, and the latter as anti-Cuban. He was also accused of collaborating with Reporters Without Borders, a French news agency with subversive aims, as well as the Madrid-based Hispano-Cuban Foundation and the Miami-based Cuban-American National Foundation, both described as terrorist.

The court concluded that while the sentences [passed on González and Rivero] are severe, they are proportional to the gravity of the crimes, given the dangerous behaviour involved. The court stressed the exemplary nature of the sentences and the need for thorough re-education of the accused and for dissuading those who hope to imitate their actions.

### **Family situation**

Married to Alida Viso Bello, also an independent journalist. Father of two children from a first marriage. Until the time of his arrest, he lived under the same roof with her and his first wife, a supporter of the regime. Since his arrest, Viso Bello has been forced to find somewhere else to live.

### **Date of birth**

1950.

### **Biography**

He used to be a journalist with the government TV station, working on children's programming. He joined the independent news agency *Cuba Press* in 1995. As Reporters Without Borders correspondent since 1998, he provided weekly information about press freedom violations.

He founded the Manuel Márquez Sterling Association with his friend Rivero in May 2001 to train independent journalists, who are often self-taught. This confused the government's attempts to discredit independent journalists as not having any professional training.

He launched *De Cuba* in December 2002, tackling subjects ignored by the government media such as racism in Cuba or the Varela Project, which gathered more than 11,000 signatures throughout the country on a petition for democratic constitutional change. The first issue's 250 copies were distributed through the network of independent libraries that have

emerged in Cuba. Until then, independent journalists had no choice but to send their articles for publication abroad. This was the first attempt to break the ruling Communist Party's news monopoly.