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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
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Agenda item 10

QUESTION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF ALL PERSONS SUBJECTED  
TO ANY FORM OF DETENTION OR IMPRISONMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Fellowship of  
Reconciliation, a non-governmental organization in consultative  
status (category II)\*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement,  
which is distributed in accordance with Economic and Social Council  
resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[3 March 1993]

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\* The present document is a summary of a publication prepared and distributed by Freedom House. Freedom House is a New York-based human rights and public policy organization founded more than 50 years ago to oppose the Nazi onslaught in Europe. Since that time, it has been a steadfast advocate for human rights and civil liberties. Its current Chairman, Ambassador Max M. Kampelman, served as the Head of the United States Delegation to the Paris and Madrid rounds of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE: MARIA ELENA CRUZ VARELA

1. Maria Elena Cruz Varela is a Cuban poet, human rights activist, and mother imprisoned since November 1991. She is an honorary member of PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) and Amnesty International has identified her as a prisoner of conscience. Freedom House has issued several appeals on her behalf. Writers, artists, civic leaders, and members of parliaments the world over have asked President Fidel Castro to release Maria Elena.

2. On 3 December 1991, The Washington Post published an editorial entitled "Thuggery in Havana" that denounced the Cuban Government for its actions against Maria Elena: "Just two weeks ago, Maria Elena Cruz Varela, dissident poet and leader of a small, non-violent human rights group in Havana called Alternative Criteria, was assailed in her apartment by government demonstrators, dragged down from the fourth floor, beaten, had documents she had written stuffed into her mouth and thereafter sentenced to two years in jail. In Fidel Castro's Cuba, political activity outside the one-party communist system is outlawed: her offence was to hold 'illegal' meetings and to 'defame' State institutions ... Such is the condition of communism in Cuba, one of the few remaining outposts of a doctrine that most other believing States have shaken off in the last few years. In Havana, the doctrine remains official gospel, enforced finally by the resources of a totalitarian State."

3. Later that same month, The New York Times published an extraordinary statement by Maria Elena Cruz Varela. The letter, according to The Times, had been written in late September. When it appeared in The Times, the author already was in detention. In her piece, Maria Elena says, "What a pity, Señor Fidel Castro, that you mistake where your opponents are; what a shame that you try to place the opposition so far from Cuba. No Señor Castro, the Cuban opposition is not from or in the United States of America, regardless of that country's questionable positions. Your opposition is yourself and your own contradictions. Your opposition is the proven economic, political and social failure of 32 years of experiments."

4. "We are your opposition, we 10 million Cubans who look around us in terror, searching for something that allows us to believe in the possible salvation of our lives and those of our families, the salvation of our dignity and survival as a civilized nation ... My duty is to make it clear to you, and to national and international public opinion, that opposition does exist in Cuba. It only does not exist among those who turn away for three reasons: fear, fear, and fear. Not only do I exist; we are many, so many that our existence is imperiously denied; we are opponents and we are not exactly in the United States. We are here, a few steps away from you, and you know it."

5. "The circuses and gastronomical festivals organized to distract your visitors don't matter. That kind of irresponsible, political neo-tourism bestowed on figures from other countries doesn't matter, the fact that they depart 'satisfied' by our sad spectacle doesn't matter. Beneath all that scaffolding live the people, and we are among those people: those who oppose, repressed to be sure, but as undeniable as a birthmark in the middle of one's

forehead. To those who survive our approaching catastrophe I want to say something: it is good, it's healthy to remember: history can absolve, but it can also condemn."

6. Harriet Babbitt, an attorney in Phoenix, Arizona who had met Maria Elena Cruz Varela in Cuba a few months earlier, wrote an appeal that appeared in The Los Angeles Times on 1 January 1992. President Bill Clinton named Mrs. Babbitt as United States Ambassador to the Organization of American States. Mrs. Babbitt wrote in The Times: "Two years ago, Cuba's Union of Artists and Writers awarded Cruz the Julian del Casal Poetry Prize. Since then, responding to economic chaos and political repression, she and several other intellectuals formed the 'Alternative Criterion'. Last May they issued the declaration, which calls for a genuine national debate involving all Cuban citizens on the economic and political problems facing their country ..."

7. "Castro's response was to subject Cruz to repeated acts of repudiation ... beating her and forcefully stuffing her writings in her mouth - no subtle metaphors for these particular thugs. On 27 November (1991), she was tried, convicted and sentenced to two years in prison for holding illegal meetings and defaming State institutions ... Castro understands the power of the spoken word. As a 64-year-old leader of a crumbling political experiment, he is beginning to understand the threat of a young, articulate woman, potentially a symbol for all Cubans whose ideas and aspirations he refuses to acknowledge as legitimate ... Maria Elena Cruz Varela is nobody's water-carrier. That this talented poet and patriotic Cuban is in prison for, in the words of Castro himself, exercising her right to express her opinion, is an affront to every person in the society of free nations. It is also the ultimate evidence of Fidel Castro's political and moral deceit."

8. It is incumbent upon the international community to do everything within its power to help prisoners of conscience like Maria Elena Cruz Varela in Cuba and elsewhere, because without their courage to stand up against injustice and to search for peaceful change, the only alternative left in many critical situations around the world is either foreign intervention or considerable bloodshed.

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