Case Information: Héctor Fernando Maseda Gutiérrez

DOB: January 18, 1943  
COUNTRY: Cuba  
OCCUPATION: Engineer and journalist  
ARREST: March 19, 2003  
ABUSE SUFFERED: Imprisonment

Background

Héctor Fernando Maseda Gutiérrez is a Cuban electrical and nuclear engineer and independent journalist. He graduated in 1974 from the “José Antonio Echevarría” Technology Faculty at the University of Havana as an electrical engineer. Mr. Maseda worked for a number of government-affiliated entities in Cuba, including the National Center for Scientific Research (CENIC). In early 1983, however, the Cuban government found that he was “not meeting the conditions for political ideological trustworthiness” that it deemed necessary for work in scientific and technical institutions, and removed him from his job with CENIC. After 5 years of study, Mr. Maseda was also prevented from completing his PhD in nuclear electronics. Because the vast majority of engineering jobs in Cuba are with government-related entities, Mr. Maseda could not find full-time, salaried employment in his field and began working as a self-employed electronics technician.

Mr. Maseda became involved in dissident activities in the 1990s and became an independent journalist in 1995. He co-founded the Liberal Democratic Party (later banned), as well as an independent press agency. He wrote hundreds of articles, essays, and reports addressing social, economic, and environmental issues ignored by the official Cuban press, including a series of articles exposing brutality in Cuban prisons.

Mr. Maseda had been harassed for a number of years for his peaceful criticism of the Cuban government. On the night of March 19, 2003, which would come to be known as the “Black Spring,” Mr. Maseda was arrested at his apartment in central Havana. He was one of 75 Cubans who were arrested and summarily tried in closed-door proceedings as part of a massive crackdown by the government. Within weeks, Mr. Maseda was sentenced to 20 years in prison for acting against “the territorial integrity of the state.” Amnesty International adopted Mr. Maseda and the other 74 dissidents as “prisoners of conscience,” prosecuted for the legitimate exercise of their political views.

In February 2011, Mr. Maseda was released from prison in Cuba on humanitarian parole following the successful intervention of Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega. Mr. Maseda had served almost 8 years of his 20-year prison term.

CHR Intervention

The CHR undertook Héctor Maseda’s case in 2003, believing strongly that Mr. Maseda had been imprisoned solely for writing a letter and articles critical of the government and sending them abroad for publication. Over the years, the CHR communicated regularly with Mr. Maseda’s wife to offer moral support and to obtain up-to-date information on his case. More than 65 letters of appeal were sent to Cuban authorities and Cardinal Ortega concerning Mr. Maseda by CHR Correspondents and by members of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies (H.R. Network), for which the CHR serves as Secretariat. The CHR also submitted Mr. Maseda’s case to a United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) human rights complaint body.
CHR Actions

**Letters of Appeal** The CHR and members of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies (H.R. Network) sent private letters of appeal to the Cuban government calling for Mr. Maseda’s unconditional release and for improved conditions of confinement, as well as appeals to other prominent individuals and institutions in a position to aid Mr. Maseda.

**Action Alerts** The CHR mobilizes members of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine in the U.S. and abroad, to become “CHR Correspondents” and take action in support of colleagues under threat through an action alert system. CHR Correspondents wrote appeals to Cuban officials in support of Mr. Maseda and other imprisoned dissidents in Cuba.

**Postcard Campaign (Letters of Support)** The CHR called on Correspondents to send messages of support and goodwill to Mr. Maseda, letting him know that they were aware of his plight and were working to gain his release.

**Communication with Family** The CHR maintained regular correspondence with Laura Pollán, the wife of Mr. Maseda (and periodically with his children) – via email and phone – to receive updated information on Mr. Maseda’s health and conditions of confinement.

**UNESCO Submissions** The CHR submitted the case of Mr. Maseda to the UNESCO Committee on Conventions and Recommendations (CCR), a human rights complaint mechanism through which governments are asked to respond to very detailed allegations of human rights abuses. Governments’ involvement in this semiannual, international dialogue helps to ensure that they are answerable for such abuses.

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**Case Timeline**

### 2003

#### March 18 - April 6, 2003

The Fidel Castro regime arrests 75 members of political opposition groups, journalists and human rights activists – including Héctor Maseda – accusing them of acting against the “integrity and sovereignty of the state” or of collaborating with foreign media for the purpose of "destabilizing the country.” In early April, Mr. Maseda is brought to trial in proceedings that failed to meet international human rights standards and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He is held in solitary confinement in “La Pendiente” Prison, 260 kilometers away from Havana where his family resides.

#### April - October 2003

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declares the imprisonment of the 75 dissidents to be arbitrary in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While in prison, Mr. Maseda suffers from serious skin allergies due to unsanitary conditions. His wife, Laura Pollán, reports that she is not allowed to give Mr. Maseda needed soap and medicines.

The **CHR** issues two action alerts – in April and October – calling on CHR Correspondents to urge the Cuban government to release Mr. Maseda, and, in the interim, ensure that his treatment and care conforms to the U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

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*CHR Actions in red*
Under the leadership of Laura Pollán (right), the wife of Mr. Maseda, the Ladies in White group is formed in April 2003. The group, composed of relatives of imprisoned dissidents, protests unjust incarceration with a silent procession each Sunday. Their white clothing symbolizes peace.

2004

January - April 2004

- The CHR submits Mr. Maseda’s case to the UNESCO Committee on Conventions and Recommendations (CCR) and appeals for the Cuban government to release Mr. Maseda and, at a minimum, improve his conditions of confinement.
- UNESCO’s CCR examines the CHR’s communication and declares it admissible, requesting that the Cuban government provide it with additional information about Mr. Maseda’s situation.

June 28, 2004

- The CHR reports to UNESCO’s CCR that Mr. Maseda continues to be held in solitary confinement under the prison’s "maximum severity" regime, allowing him to see his family only once every 3 months and to have a conjugal visit every 5 months. Circumstances strongly suggest that he has been singled out for persecution. The CHR calls on the Cuban government to release Mr. Maseda and, in the meantime, move him to a prison closer to his family.

August - December 2004

- Mr. Maseda refuses to accept visits or food packages provided by his family in order to protest his harsh treatment. In September, UNESCO’s CCR examines information from the CHR concerning Mr. Maseda and appeals to the Cuban government for clemency in his case. It also expresses concern about Mr. Maseda’s health and conditions of detention.
- In December, the CHR issues another action alert calling for the release of Mr. Maseda and provides details to UNESCO’s CCR regarding his protest.

2005

January - June 2005

- Mr. Maseda is transferred to the notorious Villa Clara Youth Prison, which is no closer to his home and usually reserved for those who have committed violent crimes. He is made to share a cell with a convicted murderer. The cell is infested with mosquitoes and floods with water when either of the prisoners bathes. He is subjected to inspections of his belongings and a humiliating strip search in front of other prisoners.
- The CHR issues another action alert calling on Correspondents to appeal for Mr. Maseda’s release and, in the meantime, for his transfer to a prison closer to his family. CHR informs UNESCO’s CCR of the degrading inspection Mr. Maseda has endured and his poor treatment in prison.

August - December 2005

- UNESCO’s CCR once again appeals for clemency in Mr. Maseda’s case. On December 19, Mr. Maseda is transferred to Agúica Prison. Although this prison is closer to Havana, it is still some 170 kilometers from his home and family. Nonetheless, Mr. Maseda agrees to be visited by his wife on December 23, 2005, ending sixteen months of separation.
2006

The CHR reports on Mr. Maseda’s prison transfer to UNESCO’s CCR but argues that he should be transferred to a prison in Havana.

In April, Mr. Maseda is among a group of prisoners inexplicably strip searched and handcuffed while being made to stand for 3 hours, causing his blood pressure to rise to dangerous levels. Mr. Maseda already suffers from eczema marginatum, arterial hypertension, and lower back pain. He also needs cryosurgery on more than 300 precancerous skin lesions caused by sun exposure.

The CHR reports the incident to UNESCO’s CCR and calls on Cuban authorities to investigate and treat the prisoners humanely. The CHR also provides details on Mr. Maseda’s poor health and requests that he receive recommended specialized treatment.

February - September 2007

Mr. Maseda’s efforts to receive emergency dental surgery are hindered when a high ranking prison official threatens to chain him, in an unsafe manner prohibited by prison regulations, on his way to a hospital.

The CHR reports the incident to UNESCO’s CCR and urges the Cuban authorities to investigate and take corrective measures.

UNESCO’s CCR repeats its calls for clemency in Mr. Maseda’s case and for his transfer to a penal institution closer to his family. In the same year, Mr. Maseda’s memoir, Buried Alive, is published in the United States. He wrote the book in prison, having smuggled it out one page at a time.

April - October 2008

UNESCO’s CCR continues to examine CHR’s case submissions and reiterates its appeals to the Cuban government. In August, Mr. Maseda’s prison regimen is changed for the better, permitting him to have more frequent contact with family. His phone privileges are, however, revoked numerous times throughout the year after he calls independent reporters and human rights activists to report on prison conditions.

January - October 2009

The CHR asks correspondents to send letters or postcards of support to Mr. Maseda to mark the 6th anniversary of his incarceration. The CHR also writes to UNESCO’s CCR disputing the Cuban government’s claim that Mr. Maseda’s family had not requested that he be transferred to a prison closer to home. The CHR provides copies of such requests made by Ms. Pollán. The CHR requests that Mr. Maseda be granted conditional release and argues that he has fulfilled all the requirements for his prison regime to be further improved in the interim.

In October his prison regime is again improved, allowing him even more frequent contact with his family—visits, use of conjugal quarters, and telephone calls.

Combinado del Este Prison, the largest of Cuba’s maximum security prisons, in Havana, Cuba.
2010

April - June 2010

UNESCO’s CCR maintains its request for Mr. Maseda’s clemency and transfer to a penal institution closer to his family. In June, Cuban authorities comply and move Mr. Maseda to “El Pitarre,” a maximum security facility on the outskirts of Havana. His transfer follows private conversations between Cuban President Raúl Castro Ruz and leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Cuba—including Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamiño.

The H.R. Network sends an action alert asking Network members to send letters to Cardinal Ortega, thanking him for his interventions and asking that he discuss other cases of political prisoners with the Cuban government.

July - December 2010

Following an initial round of discussions with President Raúl Castro Ruz, Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamiño announces that the imprisoned dissidents will be released over the next few months. Roughly half of the prisoners are freed and, as a condition of their release, are flown to Spain with members of their families. Mr. Maseda, however, refuses to leave Cuba and remains incarcerated.

2011

January 25, 2011

The CHR reveals to UNESCO’s CCR discrepancies reported by the Cuban government concerning Mr. Maseda’s medical treatment and calls once more on Cuban authorities to release Mr. Maseda.

February 11-12, 2011

Mr. Maseda is granted humanitarian parole and released from prison but refuses to accept it. He tells prison authorities that he will not leave “El Pitarre” Prison until he is exonerated or pardoned. The following day, five state security officials escort Mr. Maseda to his home in central Havana. He is one of a handful of Cuban dissidents released from prison who are permitted to remain on the island.

A free Héctor Maseda embraces his wife on February 12, 2011. Sadly, their reunion was short-lived; Laura Pollán died on October 14 of cardiac arrest 8 months after his release. She was 63.
I send you my greetings and eternal gratitude for the extraordinary work that you, and the committee that you preside over with such dignity, undertook during my imprisonment of 7 years and 11 months. You engaged in a titanic struggle, repeatedly submitting requests for my definitive release to the current Cuban authorities… I am sure that many members of your academies and other national institutions similar to yours, affiliated with the [H.R] Network, got to know about my case, became concerned, and actively intervened in order to obtain—in a civilized way—improvements in my confinement.

For all of those humanitarian actions, I send, from the depths of my heart, my warmest thanks to all of the people who, together with you, did everything possible (and impossible) so that my release could become a reality.

Héctor Maseda

(in a letter to then CHR Chair Sydney Verba)
How You Can Help

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