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A VOICE FROM CASTRO'S PRISONS

Armando Valladares is a very brave man. He survived 22 years in Castro's prisons, and he is now telling the world what it was like. It's very similar to Solzhenitsyn's descriptions of the Soviet Gulag, only Cuba is a lot closer to America.

A one-time supporter of Castro, Valladares was imprisoned in 1960 because he criticized the dictator's growing dependence on the Soviet Union. He was released last year as a result of French and Spanish intervention in his behalf.

Some of the most interesting of Valladares' revelations are his descriptions of the "new class" in Castro's Cuba which lives "a way of life completely unknown to the Cuban people." The "new class" is a favored group of government and police officials and Communist Party dignitaries.

The "new class" has access to "special" stores and products, exclusive homes which were confiscated from the middle class in pre-Castro Cuba, travel privileges, and a favored brand of justice. For example, a professional boxer, Jose Gomez, got away with committing murder without any punishment, but the possession of a Bible can land an average citizen in jail. In Communist Cuba, he says, "equal justice does not exist."

"In the first days of the Revolution," Valladares said, "Castro promised that the beaches would become the property of the people and that he would abolish private beaches. However, he has done nothing about this." Valladares says that the Club Biltmore where the well-do-do gathered in prerevolutionary Cuba, is today exclusively reserved for colonels of the political police and other officials of the Ministry of the Interior. Other beaches are similarly barred to the Cuban people, notably Jibacoa, where access is limited only to Soviet personnel and other foreigners.

Valladares says that there are 24,000 to 30,000 Soviet personnel in Cuba today. He says that Soviet officials control the Cuban economy and industry (including the sugar industry), as well as the military. He says that "the Soviets have total control of the Cuban equipment, weapons, and transportation systems. The Cuban military does not even have access to its own bases."

Essentially, all important decisions and operations are controlled by Soviet officials. Soviet "specialists" run the prisons with an iron hand. When political prisoners chanted "Soviets, go home!" in an incident now known as "Black September," they were given "the harshest of floggings."

Castro has 140,000 political and criminal prisoners in 68 Cuban penitentiaries. Havana province alone has 48,000 prisoners out of two million residents.

For a quarter of a century, Castro has used the penitentiary system to carry out a ruthless system which he calls political and social "rehabilitation." It is quite different from anything in American prisons.

Valladares and his fellow prisoners were encouraged to "reform" by such inducements as systematic beatings, mutilation, starvation (in his case, for 46 days), and hard labor. Those who refused to cooperate with this rehabilitation program were gagged and murdered.

The strictest penal institution is located on the Isla de Pinos, an island south of Cuba made famous as "Treasure Island" by Robert Louis Stevenson. Valladares says that the conditions there are "identical to those of the Soviet concentration camps under Stalin." Castro and the Communists have converted "Treasure Island" into what Valladares calls the "Siberia of the American continent."

For the "free" citizens of Cuba, the Castro regime has restructured the work week. "Occupational work" is required on Mondays through Saturdays, while "voluntary work" is expected from all on Sundays. Those who choose not to "volunteer," or who attend church services, are subject to public humiliation and investigation as revolutionaries.

The Castro regime enforces its work demands on all starting at an early age. Some young students are taught manual labor at youth "camps" before entering the factories, and uncooperative youths are sent to specially designed adolescent concentration camps.

Cuban officials apparently thought that, if they released Valladares, he would drift into obscurity among other Cuban refugees. Although he must know how vindictive the Communists are against defectors who tell the truth about Communism, he has chosen to give the world his authentic, first-hand information.

"After almost a quarter of a century of Communism in Cuba," he says, "no one can continue to excuse its crimes by talking of the immaturity of the political process. No philosophy, no symbol, can justify the impunity with which Castroism kills its enemies."