

# 2003–2004 ALA CD# 18.1 2004 ALA Midwinter Meeting

## International Relations Committee and Intellectual Freedom Committee: REPORT ON CUBA

### BACKGROUND

At the 2003 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in Toronto, the International Relations Committee (IRC) brought forward CD [Council Document] #18.5, “Resolution on Access to Information in Cuba,” a resolution for consideration by Council on access to information in Cuba in light of the recent arrest and long prison terms of political dissidents. The Council discussed the matter for 30 minutes in an information session and voted to refer it back to the IRC and the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) for further review.

The IRC and IFC have created a task force that has looked at available information on the recent events in Cuba and positions from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The Task Force has prepared this report for Council’s review and adoption.

The ALA is a member of the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA), which represents library associations around the world, including those in the United States and Cuba. IFLA created its Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee (FAIFE) to bring free expression principles, as iterated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the worldwide library community. To date, the United States has a seat on FAIFE, and the director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom serves as consultant to the committee.

The Canadian Library Association (CLA) passed a resolution in June 2003 in Toronto stating that “CLA opposes any foreign government attempts to undermine Cuba’s government through economic blockades, subversion, military adventures, assassination attempts, and outside funding of political opposition through ‘civil society’ organizations.” CLA’s resolution also called upon IFLA to send a fact-finding mission to Cuba “to investigate further the role of ‘independent libraries’ in Cuba and charges that they are funded through foreign agencies whose political program is regime change.” (ALA and IFLA investigated the issue in 2001.) At IFLA in Berlin, the IFLA Governing Board voted not to pursue this matter since the cost is prohibitive

for them. IFLA FAIFE issued statements regarding Cuba on behalf of the international library community in May and June of 2003. These are the last actions that IFLA has taken in this matter.

For background documents from ALA and IFLA mentioned in this report, please visit <http://www.ala.org/ala/iro/iroactivities/alacubanlibraries.htm>.

## REPORT

ALA supports freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as essential civil liberties and citizen rights everywhere.

ALA Policy 58.3 "Abridgment of the Rights of Freedom of Foreign Nationals (1985-86) reads: "Threats to the freedom of expression of any person become threats to the freedom of all; therefore ALA adopts as policy the principles of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. The Association will address the grievances of foreign nationals where the infringement of their rights of free expression is clearly a matter in which all free people should show concern. Resolutions or other documents attesting to such grievances will be brought to the attention of the Executive Board and Council by the ALA International Relations Committee."

ALA Policy 58.4 "Article 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1990-91) reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

ALA Policy 58.4.1 "Human Rights and Freedom of Expression" (1996-97) indicates that ALA will work with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and its members "to develop positions and programmatic plans of action in support of human rights and freedom of expression and be guided by ALA's adoption of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

ALA Policy 53.1.12 states "The American Library Association believes that freedom of expression is an inalienable human right, necessary to self-government, vital to the resistance of oppression, and crucial to the cause of justice, and further, that the principles of freedom of expression should be applied by libraries and librarians throughout the world" based on *The Universal Right to Free Expression: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, (1990-91).

Delegations from IFLA and ALA participated in the Association of Caribbean and University and Research Libraries (ACURIL) Conference in Ha-

vana in May 2001. Both delegations, which included leaders from ALA and IFLA, and members of IFLA's FAIFE and staff, used the opportunity to visit Cuban libraries and librarians and to meet with individual journalists, unionists, psychologists, and writers who had opened private library collections as "independent libraries" for other Cubans to use. Among the individuals met by ALA and IFLA members were Ramon Colas and Berta Mexidor, who were the founders of the "independent library" movement.

ALA and IFLA members and staff confirmed in discussions with the Cuban dissidents who opened private libraries, that these individuals did not consider themselves librarians, but described themselves as "political dissidents." Both the IFLA and ALA reports reiterated that individuals in Cuba should be able to collect and have access to information regardless of frontiers.

ALA Council adopted a resolution on access to information by Cuba's libraries in June 2001 which stated that "ALA opposed all efforts to limit access to information in Cuban libraries and urged IFLA to take action to improve the Cuban people's access to books and other information sources on all topics through Cuban libraries." The resolution also called for ending all efforts, including U.S. Government efforts, to limit access to information in Cuba, and called for fair U.S. postal rates to make it easier to send books to Cuba.

Among the recommendations of an ALA resolution brought by ALA and Asociacion Cubana de Bibliotecarios (ASCUBI) at the IFLA 2001 Annual Conference and Council was a statement opposing all government policies that restrict access to information, including the U.S. embargo and laws in either country that contribute to censorship.

At its Annual Conference and Council held in Boston in August 2001, the IFLA Council adopted a resolution urging "the US Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information and professional interaction imposed by its embargo and any other US Government policies."

The IFLA resolution also urged the Cuban Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies.

In addition, the IFLA resolution urged the U.S. Government to share information materials widely in Cuba, especially with Cuba's libraries, and not just with "individuals and independent non-governmental organizations that represent U.S. political interests."

In March and April 2003, over 75 political dissidents were arrested in Cuba. Included among those arrested were a number of journalists, unionists, medical doctors and writers, some of whom operate "private libraries." In response to the arrests, IFLA FAIFE issued a statement on behalf of library associations around the world that again urged the Cuban government to eliminate all obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies and

“expressed its deepest concern on the arrest, trial and long prison sentences given to Cuban political dissidents in recent weeks.”

An IFLA FAIFE press release in June 2003 reiterated the call for the U. S. Government to end the economic embargo and to lift travel restrictions for Cuban and U.S. citizens alike. IFLA FAIFE cited bureaucratic difficulties with the export of information materials to Cuba despite their formal exclusion from the embargo; a severe reduction in the capacity of Cuban libraries and citizens to purchase information materials and related technologies due to the economic effects of the embargo; indirect disruption of access to information by Cubans and Cuban libraries caused by the effects on power supply, telecommunications and other aspects of life in Cuba, and inhibitions to professional interaction and exchange caused by the restrictions on travel to the U.S. by Cuban nationals and to Cuba by U.S. nationals.

The IRC/IFC Task Force has reviewed ALA and IFLA documents and several reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch on the matter of the arrest, trial, and detention of the 75 Cubans in March and April 2003. All the information available to us indicates that none of the prisoners were charged with violent actions; rather, they were accused of collaborating with U.S. diplomats to undermine the state, and/or receiving American government funds.

This political climate brought on primarily by U.S. Government and Cuban Government legislation and policies in recent years should not be countered by censorship and imprisonment.

Neither the Cuban government nor any other government has the right to stifle or obstruct the free expression of opinions and ideas.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the commitment to intellectual freedom is a core value of the library and information profession worldwide, ALA joins IFLA in support and assistance to the Cuban library community in safeguarding free access to print and electronic information, including the Internet. IFLA has also called on Cuba's librarians to implement a code of ethics for its library profession developed by ASCUBI.

At the IFLA General Conference and Council in August 2001, ALA and ASCUBI presidents signed “A Protocol to Cooperate” that included plans for exchanges of materials, professional exchanges between American and Cuban librarians, attendance at conferences, and many other cooperative activities. Work continues on these initiatives intended to build mutual respect and trust among librarians and library workers in the two nations.

ALA supports IFLA in its call for the elimination of the U.S. embargo that restricts access to information in Cuba and for lifting travel restrictions that limit professional exchanges. ALA also supports IFLA's call for the U.S. government to share information widely in Cuba.

ALA joins IFLA in its deep concern over the arrest and long prison terms of political dissidents in Cuba in spring 2003 and urges the Cuban Government to respect, defend and promote the basic human rights defined in Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

ALA supports IFLA in urging the Cuban government to eliminate obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies, and IFLA's support for an investigative visit by a special rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights with special attention given to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, especially in the cases of those individuals recently imprisoned and that the reasons for and conditions of their detention be fully investigated.

Proclaiming the fundamental right of all human beings to access information without restriction, ALA joins with IFLA in urging the Cuban library community to monitor violations of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression and to take a leading role in actively promoting these basic rights for all Cubans.

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