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Contact: Deborah Ullmer

April 15, 2003
(202) 728-5500

Castro Quashes Free Speech Movement, Documentary Reveals

“Dissident” tells story of Varela Project, a Movement led by Nobel Peace Prize Nominee Payá

NEW YORK, NY, and WASHINGTON, D.C., April 15, 2003 – On May 9th, the Tribeca Film Festival will present “Dissident: Oswaldo Payá and the Varela Project,” a 20-minute documentary shot in Cuba and taken out of the country for international screening. The film tells the story of the Varela Project, a campaign for open elections, free speech, free enterprise and freedom for political prisoners led by Havana-based activist Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, a 2003 Nobel Peace Prize nominee.

The Varela Project, a growing, peaceful movement, draws upon a provision in the Cuban constitution that enables citizens to introduce legislation when accompanied by 10,000 signatures. Last May, Payá and other Varela organizers submitted 11,020 signatures to the National Assembly. During his visit to Havana, former President Jimmy Carter recognized the Varela Project on national TV – the first time that the Cuban people openly heard mention of the signature campaign. However, the Cuban government ignored the petition drive and cracked down on those involved, imprisoning dozens of Varela activists under false charges. Against all odds, Oswaldo Payá has vowed to continue his campaign for democratic reform in Cuba and has collected tens of thousands of additional signatures.

“This extraordinary documentary reveals how, in the face of adversity, Oswaldo Payá has created an unprecedented grassroots nationwide civic movement that reflects the democratic hopes and aspirations of the Cuban people,” said Madeleine K. Albright, NDI Chairman and former U.S. Secretary of State. “The film underscores and documents his heroic efforts as a champion of democracy.”

Since the war in Iraq began, the Cuban government has tried, convicted and sentenced in secret trials more than 80 journalists, human rights activists and independent trade union members. More than half are Varela Project organizers, many of whom appear in the documentary. Dissidents have received prison sentences for as long as 28 years.

In speaking about Oswaldo Payá and the Varela Project, former Czech President Václav Havel said, “The cry of freedom, the free action of a person, is in my opinion the most important, and it is the first nail in the coffin of a system based on a lie.”

Recently, Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas received both the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the National Democratic Institute’s 15th Annual W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award.

“Dissident” was produced by Heidi Ewing and shot in Cuba in September 2002.

President Havel, in conjunction with other world leaders, has submitted a longer version of “Dissident” (under its original name: “A Patriot’s Path to Democracy”) to the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize campaign in support of Payá’s nomination.

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About Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas:

Imprisoned at the age of 17 for openly criticizing the government, Payá himself was influenced by the 1968 democratic opening in Czechoslovakia, known as the “Prague Spring.” He founded the Christian Liberation Movement in 1988, the same year that he drew lessons from democratic forces in Chile whose nonviolent campaign achieved democratic change through a presidential plebiscite. In 1996, Mr. Payá started the Varela Project -- a drive to gather signatures calling for a referendum on civil and political rights under President Fidel Castro. Mr. Payá was honored by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for his courageous and steadfast commitment to promoting democracy with its 2002 W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award, named after the late Governor of New York.

About “Dissident: Oswaldo Paya and the Varela Project”:

The 20-minute documentary produced by Heidi Ewing portrays a grassroots pro-democracy movement -- the Varela Project -- struggling to peacefully advance human and political rights in Cuba. Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, leader of the movement, shares his uncensored story of this civic campaign, which calls for a referendum on open elections, freedom of speech, freedom for political prisoners and free enterprise. It will be shown on Friday, May 9 at 12:15 pm and Saturday, May 10 at 10:30 am at the Tribeca Film Festival at United Artists, Battery Park.

About The National Democratic Institute:

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. NDI has been working with Varela Project supporters to promote the movement internationally.

About the Tribeca Film Festival:

The Tribeca Film Festival in New York is the signature event of the Tribeca Film Institute, founded in 2002 by Robert De Niro and Martin Scorsese. The festival will take place May 3-11, 2003 in lower Manhattan.

For additional information, contact Deborah Ullmer, (202) 728-5500 or deborah@ndi.org.