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February 10, 2006

Dear Friend,

As Chairman of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), I am writing to seek your support for peaceful democratic activists in Cuba. This March will mark the third anniversary of the "Cuban Spring," when 75 independent journalists, human rights activists and independent trade union members were summarily tried and condemned to prison terms of up to 28 years, solely for seeking the basic freedoms that the Cuban government has long denied them.

Among those that continue to suffer under harsh prison conditions are 45 organizers of the Varela Project, a grassroots movement that draws on a provision in the Cuban constitution that enables citizens to introduce legislation when accompanied by 10,000 signatures. Despite the Cuban government's illegal rejection and repression of the project, organizers have managed to collect and submit more than 25,000 signatures to the Cuban National Assembly calling for a referendum on establishing a free society with open elections, freedom of speech and assembly, and freedom for political prisoners.

In 2002, NDI awarded its W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award to the Organization of American States (OAS) and to Varela Project leader Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas on behalf of the Varela Project and all courageous Cubans who have signed the petition. As an extension of the Varela Project, Mr. Payá has begun a National Dialogue process to gather widespread citizen input on a peaceful democratic transition. More than 3,000 Cubans living on the island have participated in the National Dialogue, breaking the culture of fear that has permeated Cuban society for more than four decades.

Last December, the European Parliament awarded its highest honor—the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought—to the Ladies in White, the wives, daughters, sisters and mothers of Cuban political prisoners. The Cuban government denied exit visas to representatives of the group to travel to Strasbourg to accept the Prize, which was also awarded to Mr. Payá in 2002. It also denied permission for Mr. Payá to travel to London for an event on International Human Rights Day.

Attached you will find information about Mr. Payá, the political prisoners and their efforts to encourage a peaceful democratic reform in Cuba. The solidarity of the international community is essential to improving the human rights situation in Cuba. I hope you will support the Varela Project, the National Dialogue and Cuba's courageous democratic activists.

Sincerely,

Madeleine K. Albright
Chairman