

Release Report Back

On September 11, 1999, at approximately 1:30 pm, four of eleven Puerto Rican Political Prisoners, Dylcia Pagán, Carmen Valentín, and Lucy and Alicia Rodríguez were released from the Federal Correctional Institution for Women in Dublin. At the same time in Oklahoma, Southern California, Kansas, Indiana, Connecticut, and Texas, the compañeros Elizam Escobar, Adolfo Matos, Luis Rosa, Ricardo Jimenez, Alejandrina Torres, and Alberto Rodríguez were being released or on their way to Chicago or Puerto Rico. Edwin Cortes was the first of nine to arrive at the San Juan International Airport to a jubilant mass of flag waving compatriots playing Bomba y Plena, and carrying placards announcing "Welcome!"

Banners depicting the faces of all of the compañeros, including those of Carlos Alberto Torres, Oscar Lopez Rivera, Juan Segarra Palmer, Antonio Camacho, and José Solís (who were not released under the conditional clemency offered by the administration) hung above the crowds waiting patiently to catch a glimpse of their beloved freedom fighters. It was a moving and emotional encounter as one by one on Saturday afternoon the comrades stepped forward to give thanks to their supporters and to the campaign that had gained their release. Edwin Cortes was met by Lolita Lebrón, who spent 25 years in prison before Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence in 1978.

As is with grief or any profoundly transformative situation, each of the compañeros is reacting in their own way to the experience of release from the physical, mental, and emotional confines that prison imposes on human beings. In California, in part because Lucy and Alicia had only 2 hours to catch a BOP arranged flight to Puerto Rico, and in part because they did not wish to speak with media, the sisters simply waved to supporters and media but did not stop to give interviews. Carmen and Dylcia, on the other hand, stopped to get out and greet their well wishers and gave statements to the media. The supporters were ecstatic presenting Carmen and Dylcia with flowers and gifts and surrounding them with much love, abrazos (hugs) and besos (kisses). Since their flights didn't leave until later in the evening they had time to spend with friends and supporters in two separate apartments (so as not to violate the non-association condition).

Adolfo Matos, released from Lompoc Penitentiary, also had time to share a meal with friends and supporters from Santa Barbara and Los Angeles and participated in a press conference. Like Lucy and Alicia, Alejandrina Torres avoided the press by slipping out a back door with family members who were there to meet her. The press wasn't too happy but Alejandrina was ecstatic. Although Lucy and Alicia were consciously avoiding press, Lucy was intercepted by Channel 7 at SF airport and she provided them a brief sound bite.

Media was on hand at all the prisons and at many airports. In New York at close to 12 midnight, the Rodríguez sisters were met by a crowd of well wishers and press who wanted to hear from them. They were each presented with a bouquet of red roses and graciously agreed to speak to the crowd for a short period before moving on to a hotel room to rest up before their flight to Puerto Rico.

In Chicago huge crowds greeted Alejandrina, Alberto, Ricardo and Luis. They participated in a celebratory event which each of them entered independently of the others so as not to violate their conditions. The majority of the 11 released compañeros were from Chicago when arrested. Elizam Escobar, Adolfo Matos, and Dylcia Pagán were residents of New York. In the United States, the impetus for the campaign originated in Chicago by family members, friends and the community. The National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political Prisoners and POW's spearheaded the grass roots efforts to bring the case of the political prisoners to the agenda of the left and of sympathetic legislators and worked closely with leading organizations throughout the US and internationally. In Puerto Rico, Ofensiva '92 coordinated the work around the release and amnesty campaign working closely with many organizations and politicians in Puerto Rico and also internationally.

Once in Puerto Rico and Chicago the compas have had very different experiences. Lucy and Alicia were reunited with family members from Chicago and immediately took space to be with them. Elizam, with his compañera Jan Sussler, son Eliazer and mother by his side attended a play about the Political Prisoners, as did Dylcia Pagán with her son Guillermo. Elizam has also gone to some cultural events as has Luis Rosa. Edwin was reunited with his wife and children and brother, Julio, who became paraplegic years ago in an auto accident returning from a visit to see Edwin in prison. Adolfo has not had a minute to himself in Lajas, his home town, greeting visitors, students, children, family, friends and the entire town! Alejandrina and Alberto were reunited with their families in Chicago.

The compas are living with family or with supporters who offered their homes during the transition. Lucy and Alicia were allowed to be together and Luis Rosa will be allowed to see his brother Felix, who has a record that would have kept him from seeing Luis. The compas can travel within Puerto Rico for three days without permission, but for trips over three days they must get approval by their parole officers. They will have to travel to

San Juan every two weeks to check in and the parole officers will go visit them at their homes every two weeks. They can greet each other (quick hello) if they run into each other at public sites, but they are not allowed to socialize at all (because of the non-association condition). They can attend political functions but are not allowed to organize them. Luis Nieves Falcón, who headed up Ofensiva '92, and has been a spokesperson for the campaign in Puerto Rico, has asked that individuals with records not solicit conversation or visits with the compañeros. He cited the desire by the FBI and other security agencies to see the compañeros end up back inside as the reason for this request.

There are those in Puerto Rico and outside who believe the compas are perhaps being too cautious. It has been said that their constitutional rights are being violated and that "we", meaning the public, should not encourage their "self-censorship" such as not going to El Grito de Lares on September 23*, an event celebrating an uprising in 1868 to declare the first republic of Puerto Rico. They cite popular support from the people of Puerto Rico as a source of protection and the experiences of others who have not adhered to the conditions of their paroles. Those who disagree argue that the campaign advised the former political prisoners that given the present climate of the country there were reduced possibilities that the campaign would be able to gain a better offer and encouraged them to consider accepting the offer. They argue that the public must respect the fact that accepting the offer and its conditions was their choice as was their decision not to attend Lares "at their own risk". They also note that while others may be in similar situations, the level of congressional and media attention was nil upon their release compared to the present hysteria occurring over the release of the 11 compañeros .

The overwhelming sense of incredulity and joy is of course tempered by the fact that the offer completely excluded Carlos Alberto Torres, son of the Reverend Jose "El Viejo" Torres and stepson of Alejandrina Torres, and was rejected completely by Oscar López Rivera. Juan Segarra Palmer accepted the offer but must complete 5 more years inside as did Antonio Camacho who has 2 or 3 more years. In addition, Jose Solís, who was just convicted in March was sentenced to six years in a frameup around the bombing of an army recruitment center. All of the prisoners have expressed their commitment to work for the release of their comrades. Oscar encouraged Ricardo Jimenez, who was inside with him, to accept the offer he himself rejected. His offer was to do 10 more years before coming out. Haydeé Beltran Torres, former wife of Carlos Alberto Torres is presently in Jacksonville. She separated herself from the campaign many years ago and asked that her name be removed from the amnesty petition. While many in Puerto Rico continue to include her in their literature and speeches she has explicitly asked not to be included and the campaign respected her wishes. In no way was Haydee left out of the petition for any other reason. She is working with private lawyers to have her sentence reduced and was the first of four of the Puerto Ricans to go before the parole board.

I hope this report gives you some feel for what has been going on. Obviously, the re-integration process will be a long one. At least 5 of the comrades have suffered some type of vertigo or balance instability and many things have changed. I keep remembering Don Rafael Cancel Miranda (who spent 25 years in prison) saying that once at a restaurant he stood in front of the glass doors waiting for someone to come and let him through...and then he remembered he was free.

We know this is a victory but only a partial victory because you are still inside reading this. Please know that there are folks out here working to bring attention to your cases. It is not at the level it has to be but the youth are everywhere taking the baton and running with it. I hope you remain strong and with faith. You are our hope for ourselves and for the future.

* John Coltrane and George Jackson were born on September 23, El Grito de Lares!