

“I obeyed my conscience ”

U.S. intelligence analyst Ana Belén Montes has been held in solitary confinement since 2002. She passed on information to Cuba. There is now an international movement demanding that she be held in humane conditions – and that ultimately she be freed

by Jürgen Heiser

To some people, she's a whistleblower who passed on essential information to those who would be negatively affected. To others, she is a revolutionary who broke her country's law to prevent harm from coming to a neighbouring country and to its people. To yet others, she is a prisoner who has been denied her basic human rights while being held in solitary confinement for many years, both as an act of revenge and to break her will to resist. This is Ana Belén Montes, who, on February 28, celebrated her fifty-ninth birthday in a U.S. federal penitentiary. In October 2002, she was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison by a U.S. federal court for “conspiracy to commit espionage for Cuba.” As a leading analyst at the U.S. military Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), she passed classified information to the socialist Republic of Cuba over the course of sixteen years, information that allegedly threatened U.S. national security.

Ana Belén Montes' case has been greeted by silence during the more than fourteen years she has already spent in prison. As another birthday slips by, she should no longer feel she is alone, facing the consequences of her courageous actions. For the first time this year, she received birthday cards from numerous cities in Latin America, Europe, Canada and the U.S. meant to show her that a growing number of people and organizations won't sit idly by watching as her human rights are violated (her address can be found at the end of this article). It's possible the birthday cards and other mail will never reach her cell, but the responsible U.S. authorities will nonetheless see that Ana Belén Montes is no more alone than Oscar López Rivera, Leonard Peltier, Mumia Abu-Jamal and numerous other political prisoners.

To ensure that this is the case, U.S. President Barack Obama received a letter from the “International Movement in Solidarity with Ms. Ana Belén Montes” on Thursday, January 25. The letter, from “citizens of the world, not representing any government,” will urge him to act on behalf of prisoner 25037-016, who is being held in the Carswell Federal Medical Center Prison in Texas. As a first step, Obama should ensure that she is moved from solitary confinement to general population. As a second step, the letter's many signatories expect Obama to pardon her, or at least to reduce her sentence. The letter made it clear to the President and the U.S. government that they will be dealing with a growing and unrelenting solidarity campaign intent on guaranteeing the physical and psychological integrity of this political prisoner.

Solidarity With Cuba

Ana Belén's family originally came from the U.S. Caribbean colony of Puerto Rico, automatically making her a U.S. citizen. She was born in 1957 on a U.S. military base in Nuremberg. Her family lived in that city for a few years, until her father, a military doctor and a high-ranking officer, was stationed in another country. Ana Belén grew up with one sister and two brothers. When she was fifteen, her parents divorced. In 1985, after studying international relations, the young woman successfully applied for a junior analyst position with the DIA.

Ten days after 9/11, she was arrested by FBI agents in her DIA office at the Bolling Air Force Base in Washington D. C. In response to the accusation that she had spied for Havana, she later stated that as a by then high-placed analyst responsible for Latin America, she had passed on classified information about the U.S. military strategy targeting Cuba. She had not acted for pay, but out of solidarity had used her leading position in the U.S. military intelligence service to assist the socialist

island republic, under threat from the powerful empire to its north.

As her insider knowledge grew over the years, she became increasingly convinced that she had to do something. Before the court in October 2002, Ana Belén said to the judge: “I engaged in the activity that brought me before you because I obeyed my conscience rather than the law.” U.S. government policies toward Cuba are “cruel and unfair” and “profoundly unneighborly,” so she “felt morally obligated to help the island defend itself from our efforts to impose our values and our political system on it.” For most of the last four decades, the country she worked for had “displayed intolerance and contempt towards Cuba.” At no point had the U.S. “respected Cuba's right to make its own journey towards its own ideals of equality and justice.” She only did what she “thought right to counter a grave injustice.” As such, this whistleblower basically acted to underscore South African freedom fighter and President Nelson Mandela’s maxim highlighting Cuba’s willingness to help the African liberation struggles; he stressed that his country was “proud to join the majority of nations in recognizing the right of the Cuban people to determine their own destiny.”

Ana Belén only avoided the death penalty for high treason by pleading guilty before the U.S. federal court handling her case. In her October 16, 2002 trial statement, she took responsibility for her actions. She based her decision to stand in solidarity with Cuba on a critique of the U.S. exercise of power and violence against Cuba, whose threat to the world power was not military, but lied solely in the revolutionary example it offered to the “wretched of the earth.”

Ana Belén, who acted in solidarity with Cuba out of conviction, must have felt validated by an accusation made in court by the federal prosecutor Ronald L. Walutes: As a result of her expert role at White House and U.S. Foreign Affairs briefings during the Bill Clinton administration, and, in particular, her presentation of the facts, “the Pentagon concluded that Cuba posed no military threat to U.S. national security.” Therefore, according to the Knight Ridder news service reports of the prosecutor’s statements, leading Defense Department officials were “increasingly committed to reducing the existing tensions.” This was exactly the outcome she hoped to achieve with her peace efforts. It could only have met with praise from a government intent upon reducing tensions and balancing interests.

However, at that time, a different wind was blowing in the U.S. when it came to issues related to Cuba. The court sentenced the former intelligence analyst responsible for Cuba to twenty-five years in prison with no chance of parole. Additionally, there was to be a five-year probationary period, during which, in theory, officials could declare any “indiscretion” a breach of good conduct and return her to prison until this five-year period expired. By the end of her prison sentence and the probationary period, the whistleblower will be seventy-five years old.

The U.S.’s Dirty War

In the February 8, 2016 issue of the American magazine *Counterpunch*, the American journalist W.T. Whitney referred to Ana Belén as “a prisoner of war true to her cause.” Whitney understands full well what he’s saying, even if the use of the term “prisoner of war” for a political prisoner locked up for her convictions might, at first blush, seem overly military. However, the retired paediatrician, who is working in Maine with the Let Cuba Live solidarity committee and the Pastors for Peace, who do Cuba solidarity work, explained his choice of words with the statement: “There was a war.” Of course, he’s didn’t mean that Ana Belén was herself involved in war. More to the point, he means to make clear that since the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. has conducted a dirty low intensity war against the people of the Caribbean island for pursuing their own autonomous socialist course. This war made its debut in 1961, when the Cuban army and the self-defence militias successfully beat back the mercenary Bay of Pigs invasion. As Whitney points out, “warlike aggression was the norm until the 1990s.” U.S. government agents committed acts of sabotage, carried out armed attacks against the Cuban people living in the outlying regions, engaged in biological warfare to destroy crops, planted bombs that killed tourists at holiday resorts and were

responsible for innumerable terrorist attacks everywhere on the island over the years. The most devastating example was the 1976 attack on a sold-out Cuban civilian flight, which killed seventy-three passengers of different nationalities, as well as the flight crew. For Whitney, who was active in the campaign to win the freedom of the anti-terrorist intelligence agents known as the Cuban Five, the above mentioned terrorist acts are clearly acts of war. In addition, the economic, trade and financial blockade the U.S. government has imposed on Cuba since the revolution has created enduring destitution that directly affects the Cuban population by depriving them of essential goods and foodstuffs. From Whitney's point of view, this is further evidence of goal-oriented terrorism against the civilian population: Washington "believes misery would induce Cubans to overthrow their government." As a result, "aggressors within the George W. Bush administration had a replacement government waiting in the wings."

It never, in fact, came to the open regime change that the U.S. was hoping for, but the balance sheet of the terrorist war against the island republic is still horrifying. In 1975, a U.S. senate commission had to acknowledge that there had been eight verifiable attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, for which the U.S. foreign intelligence agency, the CIA, has used the services of the mafia. "The People of Cuba vs. the United States of America for Crimes Against Humanity," a complaint drafted in 1999 and filed with the Havana provincial court recorded 3478 dead and 2099 permanently disabled as a result of clandestine attacks by U.S. intelligence agencies and the Cuban exile contras operating out of Miami. The failed attempts to assassinate members of the Cuban government – particularly Fidel Castro – were not included here.

In spite of the process to restore diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S. that began in 2014 and the plan to gradually normalize relations between the two countries, the contras in Washington and Miami have not given up their clandestine warfare. "The U. S. economic blockade remains; counterrevolutionaries inside Cuba still enjoy U. S. support and money; Cuban land in Guantanamo is still occupied; survival of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 testifies to undying cold war." Against this background, Whitney asserts that Ana Belén Montes, "who took sides, is a prisoner in that war."

Trial and Prison

El Nuevo Herald, the anti-Castro publication from Miami, reported in its March 19, 2002 Spanish edition, six months before Belén's trial began, "that Ana Belen Montes pled guilty in order to save her life." As a result of the high treason charge, she – like the 1950s "Soviet spies" Ethel and Julius Rosenberg – faced the death penalty. Her court-appointed counsel worked out a deal with the federal prosecutor Ronald L. Walutes; if she acknowledged her guilt, she would "only" be sentenced to twenty-five years. "She has to tell us everything she knows and she'd better not forget anything." The *Herald* reporter cited "a source in the intelligence community." Looking back on this statement in her 2012 article, "Ana Belén Montes: Buried Alive," the U.S. journalist Karen Lee Wald questions what threat might have been implied when Belén was invited to make a clean breast of "everything." Could the indirect threat of consequences possibly explain Ana Belén's harsh treatment in prison, because she was not willing to tell "everything she knows"?

What you won't find in the rag from Miami is something that Wald evidently learned from a different source. Apparently Belén's defense attorney arrived at an agreement with the justice system in March 2002 that he would only remain part of the process until a deal to avert the death penalty was reached. In the climate following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the application of the death penalty was extremely likely. Why was the justice system eager to avoid imposing the death penalty? Was it an attempt to avoid creating a martyr? Would it be better in the long run to be able to parade a broken "accomplice of the Cuban communists"? The latter option seems plausible, given that the court-appointed counsel, as a side issue in the context of the deal, assented to his client being denied visits, telephone access and mail – the exception being immediate family. They, however, turned away in horror, and eventually simply shunned her.

Since her arrest, Ana Belén has been isolated in conditions that the UN and international human rights organizations describe as “cruel and unusual punishment” and torture. Her prison conditions were further exacerbated after her trial, when she was placed in the Federal Medical Center (FMC) in Carswell, outside of Fort Worth, Texas. The FMC is located on a US marine compound and previously served as a military hospital. In 1994, it was repurposed as the federal prison system’s only health and psychiatric institution for women and can accommodate up to 1400 prisoners. It includes a high security unit set aside for women of “special management concerns” that can hold up to twenty prisoners. A risk of “violence and/or escape” are specified as grounds for incarceration in the unit. This is where the “spy” Ana Belén is being held in isolation, in a single-person cell.

Since its establishment, the institution has been subjected to criticism. From 2007 until her death in 2012, the journalist Betty Brink regularly reported on the shocking conditions in the FMC for the *Fort Worth Weekly*. Her final report, which appeared under the headline “Death by Indifference,” was a harrowing account of the inadequate medical treatment received by many imprisoned women. There have also been sensational scandals involving sexual assaults and rapes committed by guards and a chaplain, unexplained deaths, where investigations were delayed, and so-called medical malpractice during operations.

Ana Belén has been held in the FMC since her trial, which is to say, for more than thirteen years. However, on the basis of all of the available information, it does not appear that there is any medical reason for her to be held there. It simply seems that the FMC is the best place to sequester her. The strict isolation she is held in is another reason to be concerned about her wellbeing. She is denied all contact with her fellow prisoners. For example, before she is removed from her cell, the other prisoners are locked up. She is also forbidden access to the telephone and TV, and her contact with the outside world continues to be limited to family members. The U.S. federal prison authorities use her “espionage” conviction to rationalize this. Recently the French solidarity committee reported that one of Ana Belén’s cousins from Puerto Rico visited her and said she was doing “fairly well” and was at least permitted to read newspapers and books. However, visits, letters and packages from non-family members are still prohibited. We are told that if anyone writes to her, the institution returns the letter by registered mail. On Ana Belén’s birthday, many of her supporters will be testing that.

International Solidarity

Washington’s efforts to disappear the Cuban Five into isolation in U.S. high security prisons has failed in the face of the perseverance of the Cuban people, who have not buckled under the pressure of the U.S. blockade. Persistent international solidarity has, of course, also played an important role. The campaign to free the five was initially the initiative of a small group of people, who coordinated their actions with the Cuban government’s foreign policy, growing in strength one step at a time for more than a decade, before finally forcing open the prison doors, ushering in a new intergovernmental political relationship in the process.

While Havana has not acted as forcefully in Ana Belén’s case, the distinction must be taken into consideration; the Cuban Five are Cuban citizens, whereas Ana Belén Montes is a Puerto Rican with U.S. citizenship. That means that the necessary steps to improve her prison conditions and ultimately win her freedom require that the solidarity movement that has been formed also take responsibility for protecting a “fellow citizen,” specifically the world citizen Ana Belén Montes. Bélen herself pointed the way in 2002, when she denounced the “intolerance and hatred” of the U.S. government for Cuba and recommended the development of a policy “that is based instead on neighborly love” and “that recognizes that Cuba, like any nation, wants to be treated with dignity and not with contempt.” Bélen added that that would permit these neighbours “to work together and with other nations to promote tolerance and cooperation in our one ‘world-country,’ in our only ‘world-homeland’.”

It is precisely Ana Belén Montes' perception and consciousness of herself as a citizen of the world that provides the starting point for the initiatives of the international solidarity movement. Normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations leads to hope that Belén's prison conditions will improve and that she will be freed from her prison cell. That is the goal of the various petitions addressed to U.S. President Obama, who will be visiting Cuba in March, petitions that have gained a lot of support. At the beginning of the letter mentioned above, which Obama received on February 25, he is reminded that he himself said that the U.S. is confident that there will be "respectful relations and cooperation between our peoples and our governments." Fourteen years earlier, on October 16, 2002, when her trial began, Ana Belén said that her greatest wish was "to see amicable relations emerge between the United States and Cuba." Documents produced by the international solidarity movement remind us that in 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry said that both countries were determined "to live as good neighbours based on mutual respect" and "to turn towards the future with hope." In 2002, Ana Belén was saying the same thing when she stated in court: "I hope my case in some way will encourage our government to abandon its hostility towards Cuba and to work with Havana in a spirit of tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding."

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A White Rose for Ana

Please send greetings and birthday cards to Ana Belén Montes, who will celebrate her fifty-ninth birthday on February 28, 2016, to the following address (it is essential that you write her prisoner number on cards and letters and that you do not forget to include your return address):

Ms. Ana Belén Montes
Register # 25037-016
FMC Carswell
Federal Medical Center
P.O. Box 27137
FORT WORTH, TX 76127, USA

Letter/petition to President Obama from the "International Movement in Solidarity with Ms. Ana Belén Montes" (sent on Feb. 25, 2016):

<http://www.letcubalive.org/ana-belen-montes.html>

MoveOn.org "Buried Alive" petition:

<http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/buried-alive>

Change.org "Immediate Freedom for Ana Belén Montes" petition:

<https://www.change.org/p/barack-obama-libertad-inmediata-para-ana-belen-montes>

[The original article appeared here: <https://www.jungewelt.de/2016/02-25/051.php>]