



EYE on CUBA

Theme Report II Mental Health

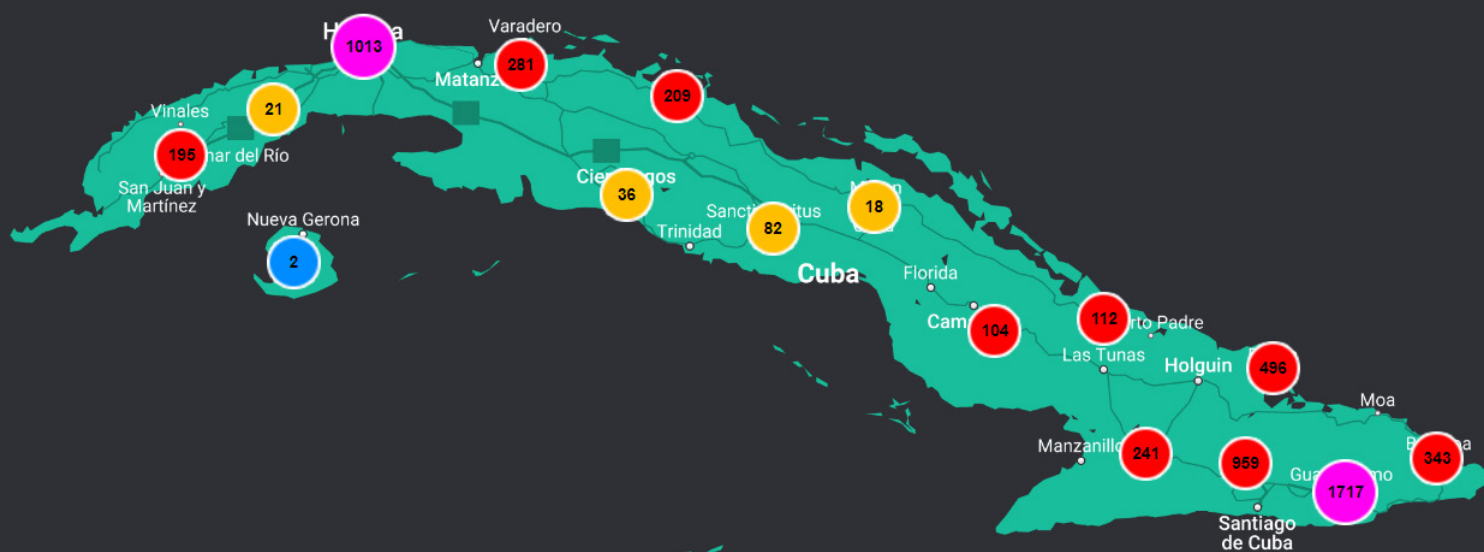


EYE on CUBA
Monitoring Human Rights Abuses in Cuba

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The cases shown do not allow us to know first-hand the reality of Cuban civil society, which often faces repression from the authorities.

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Introduction on PIN, Psychosocial Support and the Report

People in Need (PIN) is a non-for-profit non-governmental organisation, created in 1992 in the Czech Republic, currently operating in dozens of countries including Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Ukraine, Serbia, Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, etc. Throughout its 30 years' experience it has based itself on the principles of freedom, humanism, equality and solidarity, focusing on human dignity and freedom. Similarly, throughout its trajectory, it has placed itself in favour of the full exercise of the rights contemplated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is why it has characterised itself for humanitarian assistance, fight against poverty and aid in authoritarian regimes in different regions.

As part of its efforts for ensuring human rights, and being aware of the critical situation of these rights, PIN started operating in Cuba in 1997 through its Eye on Cuba project. The primary objectives of this project are the defence of human rights of the inhabitants of this island, aid to the Cuban population, and spreading information among the international community concerning the human rights situation in this country.

Eye on Cuba has worked in supporting local initiatives in all Cuban provinces in order to seek the promotion and protection of human rights of Cubans. Likewise, it has set up a support and protection network on behalf of activists and citizens who are victims of abuse perpetrated by the currently established regime. In turn, it has built a documentation platform that gathers updated and reliable data offered by the inhabitants, which operates as a key means for making the current situation in the island visible. This information is systematised and arranged and ultimately posted in the official website of Eye on Cuba. This data base seeks to show the various and serious abuses committed against the civil population, as well as to offer a sufficiently broad and reliable panorama.

Among the various abuses shown by the data platform, one can see violation of civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights. However, one piece of information that has been withheld in the discussions is the way in which the context of repression of human rights affects the mental health of those who live in that context. In this respect, Eye on Cuba finds the need to carry out the present theme report as a part of the annual reports that reflect the particular situations in the Cuban context.

The purpose of this report is to make visible the context of human rights in 2021, and the way this translates into a particular deterioration of the psychosocial wellbeing of Cubans. It has been developed on the basis of data provided by the beneficiaries and by specialists in psychology. Both of these groups have contributed and have played a key role in the results obtained. Below, the report shows data gathered concerning psychological violence and reports obtained through specialised therapy. All of this provides a general overview of the state of mental health of the people in the island.

Mental health and repression

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has referred to the concept of health as “...a state of full physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not just the absence of malaises or diseases”.¹ Of course, one cannot assert that someone is healthy if mental health is lacking. This has involved an inconvenience at the global level, since mental health has been regarded as a taboo for centuries. This is especially the case for Latin American countries, which also carry a history of dictatorial regimes and repressive governments.

It is only in the dawn of the 19th century that the concept of health changes from a merely physical approach to one that takes into account the psychological factor, thus awakening interest around mental health.² While in the human rights milieu there had previously been a concern about war conflicts, a joint development of fundamental rights intermingled with psychology had not been generated up to now.

The strengthening of this relationship can be attributed to three main sources. The first of them is the “involvement of mental health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysis specialists, physicians, social workers, etc.) in the social movements.”³ This was especially observed in armed movements and the work carried out jointly with left-wing parties and human rights activists. Similarly, a key contribution has been that of exiled Argentinian psychologists who had undergone traumatic experiences as a result of the dictatorial regime existing in their country at that time. Finally, it is worth noting the work carried out by Ignacio Martín Baró, a social psychologist and founder of Liberation Psychology, whose emphasis is found in human rights in war situations as well as in political repression.⁴

Political repression is not an unknown subject to people living in Latin American and Caribbean countries. During approximately one-half of the 20th century, Latin America was characterised by the coming to power of military regimes and dictatorships, which eliminated and tortured thousands of people resorting to formally legal juridical frameworks.⁵ This is not far from the present situation—dictatorships and State powers now exist in Latin America that govern through what is known as an “exception regime,” which consists of “...legal powers to suspend individual rights and guarantees and to exercise political power in a discretionary manner.”⁶ Since they have a political justification, rulers use this in their own favour in order to repress the people. They can then declare opposition to the government to be a punishable crime, which inevitably causes fear among the people.

1 Frequently asked questions (no date). World Health Organisation. Retrieved 18 October 2022 from <https://www.who.int/es/about/frequently-asked-questions>

2 Arias, B. E. (2013). Salud mental y violencia política. Atender al enfermo psiquiátrico o reconocer al sujeto de la micropolítica (Mental Health and Political Violence: Caring for Psychiatric Patients or Acknowledging the Subject of Micro-politics). *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría*, 42(3), 276-282. <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/806/80629821006.pdf>

3 Miguel A. Pichardo & Instituto IMB, Mexico City (undated). Historia del movimiento de salud mental y derechos humanos (History of the Mental Health Movement and Human Rights). In Instituto de Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos. <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r26104.pdf>

4 Ibidem.

5 Lira, E. (undated). Consecuencias psicosociales de la represión política (Psychosocial Consequences of Political Repression). In *Psicología y Derechos Humanos* (pp. 221-246). Icaria Editorial S.A. <https://biblioteca.iidh-jurisprudencia.ac.cr/index.php/documentos-en-espanol/verdad-justicia-y-reparacion/1229-consecuencias-psicosociales-de-la-represion-politica/file>

6 Lira, E. (undated). Consecuencias psicosociales de la represión política (Psychosocial Consequences of Political Repression). In *Psicología y Derechos Humanos* (pp. 221-246). Icaria Editorial S.A. <https://biblioteca.iidh-jurisprudencia.ac.cr/index.php/documentos-en-espanol/verdad-justicia-y-reparacion/1229-consecuencias-psicosociales-de-la-represion-politica/file>

Constant violence that is part of political repression involves serious repercussions for the victims, and mental health is one of the most affected areas. Undoubtedly, “When living in Latin America under governments that undercut human rights, citizens are constantly under pressure. Fear and anxiety ... are a day-to-day experience.”⁷ As a result of this, mistrust emerges among people, and little by little this leads to an isolation that limits social interaction and in which one prefers to keep silent rather than freely expressing one’s opinions. Similarly, those who are persecuted are constantly experiencing the fear of dying, being tortured or being “disappeared”. In this way, the State gradually manages to eliminate the sense of common belonging and safety that all people have when they feel at home.⁸

Torture has a terrifying impact on those who undergo it. It causes fear and suffering for them, for their families and for society at large. The kidnapping and disappearance of people greatly harms the mental health of the victims’ family members, who “...experience emotional collapse in the face of initial powerlessness, anguish and uncertainty.” They are forced to try to live in the midst of sorrow and an endless grief resulting from forceful separation. As years go by, the suspicion of their relative’s death increases, and yet they never get to be fully certain that this is the case. Another important factor that must be pointed out, and which negatively impacts mental health, is the revictimization that both leaders and activists undergo. One instance of this is the fact that they are subject to annoying trial processes that show little procedural celerity.

The topic of mental health has become increasingly relevant over the last few years, and has become a concern at the global level. A study carried out by the University of New York in 2017 found that 85 percent of human rights activists that were surveyed show a condition of concern for their own mental health and emotional wellbeing.¹⁰ Suicide is one of the major concerns in this area, since many people resort to it in order to escape reality. This subject is hard to handle in Latin America, because “...historically, there has been a feminisation of mental health, a connection to degenerate genes or to a person’s weakness, that has led to an inappropriate handling of mental disorders.”¹¹

In the case of Cuba, subjected to a dictatorial regime led by Miguel Díaz Canel, human rights violations and political repression are part of daily life for those inhabiting this island. According to the Pan-American Health Organisation, alarming data exist concerning the status of mental health and suicide in this country: “Cuba is one of the countries with a rate above 10 for every 100,000 inhabitants.”¹² ;The province of Havana is the one with the most cases (a total 205) in 2021, followed by Holguín and Mayabeque. It has also been determined that suicide is the third most common cause of death among adolescents living in Cuba.¹³

While it is known that attempting against one’s own life is a multi-factor phenomenon, the high suicide rate and the daily repression suffered by Cubans, as well as the poor living conditions they face, is no mere coincidence. Given the strong relationship between social repression and the deterioration in mental health, it is indispensable to embrace and project the state of the latter within the island of Cuba in order to raise awareness among people, as well as in order to orient the relevant actions that will have a positive impact on it.

7 Guarín, D. (25 August, 2021). Represión y tristeza: la salud mental de Latinoamérica (Repression and Sadness: Mental Health in Latin America). Vice Labs. <https://www.vice.com/es/article/n7byb8/represion-y-tristeza-la-salud-mental-de-latinoamerica>

8 Lira, E. (undated). Consecuencias psicosociales de la represión política (Psychosocial Consequences of Political Repression). In *Psicología y Derechos Humanos* (pp. 221-246). Icaria Editorial S.A. <https://biblioteca.iidh-jurisprudencia.ac.cr/index.php/documentos-en-espanol/verdad-justicia-y-reparacion/1229-consecuencias-psicosociales-de-la-represion-politica/file>

9 Ibidem.

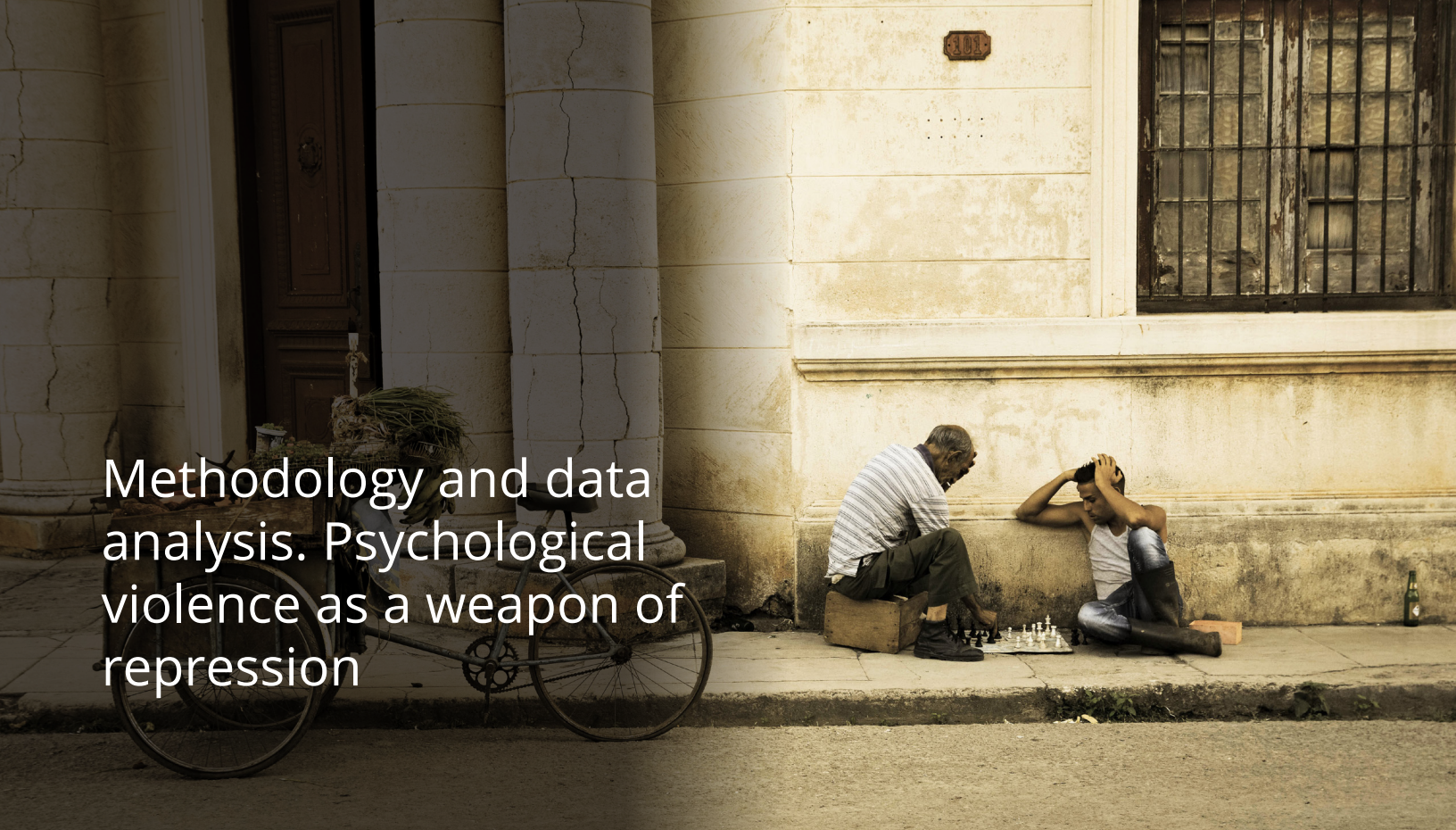
10 Guarín, D. (25 August, 2021). Represión y tristeza: la salud mental de Latinoamérica (Repression and Sadness: Mental Health in Latin America). Vice Labs. <https://www.vice.com/es/article/n7byb8/represion-y-tristeza-la-salud-mental-de-latinoamerica>

11 Ibidem.

12 Un panel que permitió aproximarse al tema del suicidio en Cuba y su prevención. (“A Panel That Made It Possible to Approach the Subject of Suicide in Cuba and Its Prevention”) (2021, 14 September). PAHO/WHO | Pan-American Health Organisation.

<https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/14-9-2021-panel-que-permitio-aproximarse-al-tema-suicidio-cuba-su-prevencion>

13 “El mundo perdona deudas de la dictadura pero sigue en deuda con el pueblo cubano (“The World Condones the Debt of the Dictatorship but Continues to be Indebted to the Cuban People”) (2021, 3 noviembre). Diario Las Américas. <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/cuba-esta-los-paises-la-region-mas-suicidios-n4236021>



Methodology and data analysis. Psychological violence as a weapon of repression

a. The Eye on Cuba platform

The Eye on Cuba network gathers data from the information provided by collaborators who tell their experiences, and, on that basis, the vulnerated rights are identified according to the Universal Human Rights Declaration. Over the year 2021, a total 230 cases were gathered.

Identity of the victims

During 2021, 230 cases distributed in the whole territory were recorded. Of them, 184 cases were committed against people identified as men, i.e. 80%, and 46 cases were committed against people identified as women, representing the remaining 20%.

From the total documented cases, it became evident that the main victims of human rights violations were activists, precisely because their exposure places them in a position of higher vulnerability: 65.65% of the victims were activists, while the remaining 34.35% were non-activists.

Psychological violence

Of the 46 cases perpetrated against people identified as women, it was recorded that in 28.26% of them there was a manifestation of physical violence against them. 21.74% assert that they underwent some kind of psychological violence, while 32.61% of them were arrested and 54.35% of the cases received threats.

Of the total 230 cases provided by the network of collaborators, 12.17% show some type of psychological violence against activists or civilians. Specifically, based on the cases reported from the 15th November demonstrations, it was determined that 33.33% of them experienced psychological violence. Concerning the 11th July demonstrations, 7.58% of the cases recorded included acts of psychological violence.

b. Internal report of psychosocial assistance in Cuba, 2022

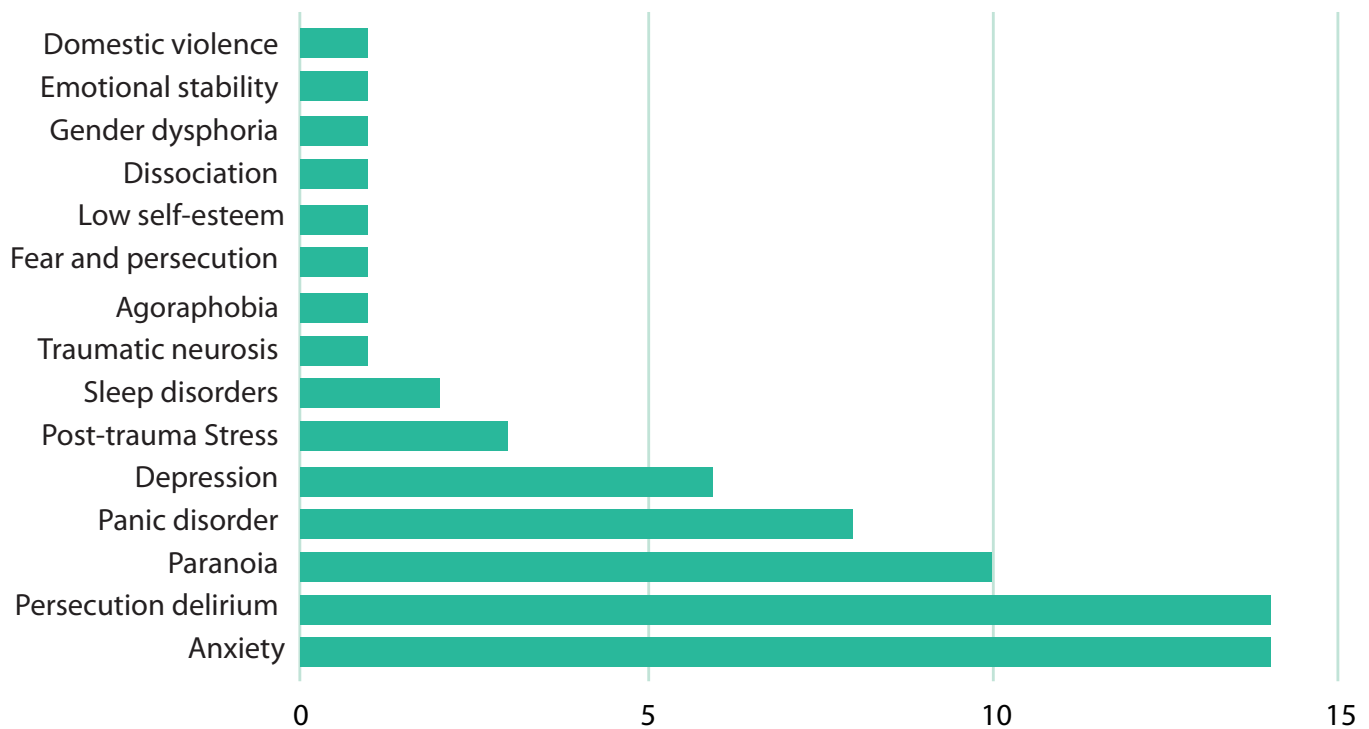
The internal report of psychosocial assistance in Cuba takes data from January to April, 2022. The results are based on reports obtained on the basis of therapy sessions offered to 15 beneficiaries (11 of them identified as men and 5 as women), developed by 4 psychologists previously trained by People in Need and Psychologists Without Borders in order to lead sessions focused on trauma, handling fear, care in the midst of psychological crisis, and handling grief.

15
Beneficiaries

4
Psychologists

Diagnoses found

On the basis of the diagnosis provided by the psychologists and of an anonymous report of the 15 beneficiaries, it can be observed that the impact on activists shows a tendency towards generalised anxiety, which translates into persecution deliria, fear and depression caused by the repression they are periodically subjected to.



Concerning mental health and psychosocial support in the sessions

During the first sessions, users showed lack of motivation, distrust and fear as they faced the possibility of being evaluated. So a briefing was carried out on the importance and usefulness of the therapies, and this resulted in confidence for later sessions. Likewise, in the first evaluations, beneficiaries showed a series of psychosomatic symptoms resulting from the context of repression, which were duly treated: headaches, persecution delirium, spasms, insomnia and the like.

It was determined that most users have a moderate level of anxiety, and that their perception of that fact is almost null. Given this situation, the specialists offered them tools for self-help, psychoeducation and participatory techniques. Another issue is the elevated fear that users carry with them, especially the persecution delirium caused by the persecution events they have been subjected to. In order to offer help, the psychologists worked in assessing their emotions, and they were also offered a system of support, self-help guidance and group sessions.

Concerning the support networks, it was evident that many of them prefer to hide their emotions and problems from their families, partners and friends, which results in problems of anguish and perception of loneliness. To address this situation, emphasis was made on the importance of these networks, their approach and the need to discover emotional refuge. Concerning decision-making in conflicts, all the beneficiaries have been affected and show symptoms of anxiety and asphyxiation. As a result, the psychologists reinforced the topic of support networks and self-help techniques for decision-making in conflict situations, as well as recommendations through psychoeducation.

Identified threats

Throughout the sessions that were held, six major threats were identified that resulted in harm to the mental health of beneficiaries:

Arbitrary arrests	Political persecution	Conditions of poverty or extreme poverty
Transit throughout the island	Restrictions on access to information and connection	Overload of family responsibilities

Conclusions

The Eye on Cuba platform has documented the way the Cuban regime uses psychological violence as a tool of repression. This takes place through various actions such as harassment, threats, intimidation and others. These actions become worse once the regime manages to grab its opponents, who are then questioned, imprisoned without due process and tortured, which causes lifelong aftereffects on the psyche of the victims.

The deterioration of mental health of human rights defenders in Cuba was demonstrated in the psychological care sessions that PIN provided through psychology professionals. Psychological violence is as harmful as physical violence, and the international community must condemn it just as strongly.

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