

Online novel details struggle for press freedom in Cuba

Madrid, Nov 28 (EFE) Exiled Cuban author and journalist Julio San Francisco documents the struggle for press freedom in his homeland in 'Prensa Gulag', an online novel that the co-founder of an independent news agency on the island has been working on for much of his life.

With this novel, now available at bubok.es, lulu.com and amazon.com, the 55-year-old San Francisco pays tribute to 'all those Cubans who have given their lives for press freedom' or who remain in prison for this reason, the author told EFE in an interview.

The almost 600-page novel is 'the first to be published on the arduous struggle by the island's reporters for press freedom', said the writer, who, along with his friends Raul Rivero and Carlos Alberto Montaner, is one of the most influential journalists among the Cuban exile community.

'I first experienced this book in real life and then I wrote it,' San Francisco said, adding that he was forced to leave the island 12 years ago because 'the alternative was to rot in prison'.

He arrived in Spain with a 'true literary jewel' from the Cuban Political Police stamped into his passport: 'Definitive exit permit, for a definitive period of time.' That means banishing someone from a country, according to San Francisco, who dealt with that theme in one of his most famous poems, 'El desterrado' (The Exile).

San Francisco said he could have chosen the US as his adopted homeland but opted for Spain because his grandparents 'were Galician' and because the language is the same. 'Emotionally, I felt closer to this country,' he said.

'Prensa Gulag' describes the launch of the first private, independent news agency in Communist Cuba, Habana Press, in 1995. San Francisco served as deputy editorial director of that entity, which gave rise to what 14 years later is known as the Cuban Free Journalism Movement, according to a note facilitated by the author.

'This movement comprises more than 50 small agencies and 200 journalists across Cuba, 26 of whom are in prison and 12 exiled,' he said.

In the book's prologue, Luis Maria Anson, a journalist and member of Spain's Royal Academy of Language, said the language used in the novel 'is precise, moving, thought-provoking, brutal, electrifying, a permanent flame of lyricism and insolence'.

The protagonist of 'Prensa Gulag' is Arturo Estuardo, a dissident journalist who fights for press freedom in Cuba even though that struggle leads him to be 'arrested and tortured', the author said.

'It's a novel with (both a fictional and autobiographical backdrop), whose characters move amid (a world of) ideals, struggle, friendship, love, police persecution, infiltrated agents, tapped telephones,' the writer said.

San Francisco said he has great faith 'in the new technologies' and for that reason decided to publish the work online via the world's leading online bookstores.

The author of 'Todo mi corazon y otros agravantes, poemas escritos en La Habana y Madrid' (My Whole Heart and Other Problems: Poems Written in Havana and Madrid) said he is 'absolutely convinced' that he will return to his homeland, although he doesn't know when.

'The transition to democracy in Cuba is inevitable, like in all countries where there has been a dictatorship or tyranny, and I don't think it will be (Cuban President) Raul Castro who initiates this process,' the writer said.

But 'when Fidel Castro dies and Cubans know that the one who created all this is four metres below ground, the changes will come more quickly because the people will begin to behave as if the dictatorship has ended', added San Francisco, who is confident his novel will be read in Cuba even though his books have been banned on the island.

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