

# Before And Beyond the 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*By Sylvia Namale and Fatoumata Toure*

To date, tens of thousands of activists from every region of the world still take part in the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence Campaign. The campaign's central messages – women's rights are human rights and violence against women constitutes a violation of human rights – have been a rallying call of the women's movement. Recognizing that violence against women affects people from every country, race, class, culture, and religion, the 16 Days Campaign provides an opportunity for activists to work together in solidarity and draw upon this period of heightened international attention to gain support for their local efforts.

## **In history**

### **Reign of Terror in the Dominican Republic**

On the night of Tuesday, May 30, 1961, **Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina**, was shot to death on San Cristobal Avenue, Santo Domingo. He had ruled for ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination,. His tyranny, historically known as "La Era de Trujillo" ("The Trujillo Era"), was considered one of the bloodiest of the 20th century.



Above, **Patria Mercedes Mirabal** (February 27, 1924 – November 25, 1960), **María Argentina Minerva Mirabal** (March 12, 1926 – November 25, 1960) and **Antonia María Teresa Mirabal** (October 15, 1935 – November 25, 1960) — were citizens of the Dominican Republic, who fervently opposed the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. **Bélgica Adela "Dedé" Mirabal-Reyes** (March 1, 1925 - present) Known as **Dedé Mirabal**, was not murdered and has lived to tell the stories of the death of her sisters. Presently, she still lives in Salcedo, Dominican Republic. She resides in the house where the sisters were born and works to preserve her sisters' memory at a

museum name after the Mirabal sisters in Salcedo where the women lived the final ten months of their lives. Doña Dede has just published a book "Vivas en el Jardín", (They live on in the garden) released on August 25th, 2009.



The house in Salcedo, today a Museum.

The Mirabal sisters had a wealthy businessman for a father and they grew up in a cultured upper middle class setting. When Trujillo came to power, their family lost almost all of their fortune. Minerva became particularly passionate about ending the dictatorship of Trujillo and got involved in the anti-Trujillo movement. Trujillo was attracted to the young Minerva since he danced with her at a party in San Cristóbal in 1949. She studied law but having rejected Trujillo's romantic advances; the dictator ordered that while she would be issued a degree she was not to be called to the bar. Her sisters followed suit, and they eventually formed a group of opponents to the Trujillo regime, known as the Movement of the Fourteenth of June whose code word was "*las mariposas*" –the butterflies.

### **Political Persecution and Sexual Harassment**

Minerva Mirabal and her sister Antonia María Teresa were repeatedly imprisoned and tortured. The husbands of all three suffered the same fate at the infamous La Victoria Penitentiary in Santo Domingo. Undeterred, they persisted in fighting Trujillo's dictatorship. After the sisters' numerous imprisonments, Trujillo decided to rid himself of them once and for all.

Several circumstances could have led Trujillo to kill the Mirabal sisters. They represented a threat to his regime because they were well known and admired all over the country. No matter how many times Trujillo arrested them nor how much of their property and assets he confiscated, Minerva, Patria and Maria Teresa pursued their relentless struggle for the restoration of democracy and civil liberties in the Dominican Republic. It was a well known fact that the dictator, who was a married man, liked young girls and maintained several mistresses in his mansions all across country

Trujillo was very selective in choosing people he knew would be ready to commit such a horrible crime. His murder squad came from the Military intelligence agency that had been involved in the disappearance of critics of the regime. The officers were selected on the basis of their previous actions by Victor Alicinio Peña Rivera and they were: Ciriaco de la Rosa, Ramon Emilio Rojas, Alfonso Cruz Valeria, y Emilio Estrada Malleta.

### **Murder most foul**

On November 25, 1960, three of the four Mirabal sisters — Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa — traveled north from Salcedo with driver Rufino de la Cruz to Puerto Plata to visit Patria and Minerva's jailed husbands at La Cuarenta. It was nighttime when they left the jail, and a rainstorm was already underway. As they drove along the Carretera Santiago-Puerto Plata, a road between the two cities, their Jeep was stopped by the aforementioned henchmen of Trujillo. As it

is very difficult, if not impossible, for a person who was not present at the murders to accurately tell this part of the story, a narration of the act as recounted by one of the actual murderers is more appropriate. This excerpt, as narrated by Ciriaco de la Rosa, is from the *Dominican Encyclopedia 1997 CD-ROM*:

### The murderers speak

*“After stopping them, we led them to a spot near the chasm where I ordered Rojas to pick up some sticks and take one of the girls; he obeyed the order and took one of them, the one with the long braids [Maria Teresa]. Alfonso Cruz chose the tallest one [Minerva] and Malleta the driver, Rufino de la Cruz. I ordered each one to go to a sugar cane grove on the edge of the road, each one separated so that the victims wouldn't sense the execution of one another. I ordered Perez Terrero to stay and see if anyone was coming who could find out about the situation. That's the truth of the situation. I don't want to deceive justice or the state. I tried to prevent the disaster, but I couldn't, because if I had, he [Trujillo] would have killed us all.”*

In this manner, the Mirabal sisters and Rufino de la Cruz were clubbed to death alongside a mountain road between Puerto Plata and Santiago. Patria was 36 years old at the time, Minerva was 34, and Maria Teresa was 24. This horrific act did have consequences for Trujillo. Their Jeep was pushed over a cliff to make it seem like an accident, but everyone knew Trujillo had ordered the killing. The murder of three defenseless women was the last straw for the Dominican people. This was the beginning of the end of the Trujillo regime.



The Mirabal sisters were buried in Salcedo Province on the property of their second home where they lived the last ten months of their lives. This home has also been turned into a museum in their honour and is open to the public. The three sisters are buried together, and Manolo, Minerva's husband, is also buried with them. }

### The legacy of the Mirabal sisters

A Dominican scholar Julia Alvarez has written a book “En el tiempo de las Mariposas”( In the times of the Butterflies ) which was made into a film starring Salma Hayek. Minerva’s daughter known as **Minou Tavarez Mirabal (pictured right)**, a graduate of Havana University became a politician and served as the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Dominican Republic. At present she is an active Member of Parliament Senator in Santo Domingo. A nephew to the Mirabal sisters, Dr.Jaime Fernandez Mirabal, Doña Dede’s son was Vice President of the Dominican



Republic from 1996-2000. On 21<sup>st</sup> November 2007, their home Province of Salcedo was renamed Hermanas Mirabal Province.

On December 17, 1999, the United Nations General Assembly designated November 25 (the anniversary of the day of the murder of the Mirabal sisters) as the annual date for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in commemoration of the sisters. This day also marks the beginning of the 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE. The end of the 16 Days is December 10, which is also the International Human Rights Day.

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