

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Visit to Cuba

Spring 2004

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Purposes of Visit

1. To research and evaluate the current state of and trends in overall religious freedom in Cuba
2. To offering solidarity and support to the Cuban Church
3. To meet with and express solidarity with families of Christian prisoners supported by CSW – and through them to send messages of solidarity to those prisoners
4. To obtain firsthand news of the well-being of the three Cuban Christian prisoners supported by CSW

Summary of Findings

Religious Freedom

Since CSW's last visit to Cuba in 2002 there has been a marked deterioration concerning human rights in all areas. Over the past two years the Cuban government has begun to systematically roll back reforms made in the 1990's and to implement harsher, more orthodox communist legislation affecting all areas of life. While the major crackdown has been targeted at crippling an emerging grassroots human rights and democracy movement – there have also been adverse effects on religious freedom in the country.

Because of the difficulties, mostly relating to security, in obtaining accurate information from inside Cuba regarding the human rights situation, this CSW visit was essential in order to gauge the current position in which religious groups find themselves. The visit consisted of a two week stay, travelling more than 2500 kilometres back and forth across the island, visiting churches, and meeting with a number of church leaders from different denominations.

Property

According to church leaders the most pressing problem for the church relates to property issues. As stated above, the government has been tightening restrictions in all areas in an effort to return to more orthodox socialist principles. This approach has been applied to property rights, and the authorities have become much stricter in this area, eliminating legal loopholes concerning property ownership. Following Socialist doctrine all property ultimately belongs to the State to be distributed as the authorities deem appropriate. At the moment Cubans are allowed to live in their family homes but are not able to sell their property (unless it is to the State at a cut-rate price) or leave it to non-family members.

This potentially holds the most severe repercussions for the house churches¹ which number in the thousands across Cuba. As CSW has noted before, the Cuban government never actually legalised their existence, but merely tolerated their growth throughout the 1990's. Many of these house churches are actually functioning as regular churches, with pews, pastors and congregations sometimes numbering up to 200. They have now run into difficulties, however, as local authorities are cracking down on "appropriate" use of property. Pastors reported that local authorities in some areas had closed house churches down, giving varying reasons for doing so. In some instances they declared the building to be "unfit" for a religious meeting, in others they apparently wanted the building for their own use and took it as a prerogative of the State.

While many house churches continue to operate the authorities have the right to close them down at any time. Many pastors expressed the fear that they expect more closures – particularly in rural areas and small towns. Ideally the Cuban government would formally legalise all house churches operating across Cuba and lift the current building and renovation restrictions. However, it is not likely to occur under the current government without considerable international pressure.

The property issue also poses difficulties for mission work by Cuban churches inside Cuba. Because pastors and their families are considered "non-contributors" to the revolution (which puts them in the same category as those who refuse to work) they are not automatically granted a place to live in the same place where they work. Despite this, however, the Cuban churches continue to establish missions. Missionaries are forced to find their own lodging with the help of the Church – often in the already overcrowded homes of church members or in substandard housing. CSW visited one such home which would be considered uninhabitable by European standards. Pastors expressed their disappointment that they had been prevented from sending out missionaries to many locations because of a lack of suitable accommodation.

Freedom of Speech

Pastors and other church leaders continue to be forced to walk a fine line in their preaching and other public speaking. There were reports that some of the more charismatic churches have run into difficulties through their "prophetic" ministries,

¹ The bulk of growth in the Protestant Church has been in the house church movement as the government does not allow the construction of new church buildings. Existing churches are confined to church buildings from before the Revolution.

which by nature are often impromptu and extemporaneous, as some of the prophecies were construed by the government to be political in nature. There were reports that church leaders were detained and questioned because of prophecies given in their church or even by religious leaders outside of Cuba.

In addition, the Cuban government continues to place severe restrictions on any church activity outside the church building. There were reports that some churches had obtained permits for Christian activity in non-religious buildings (such as a Havana amphitheatre) only to be forcibly shut down when they attempted to exercise this right. CSW was also told that in 2003 a North American orchestra had been invited to perform Handel's Messiah in the Havana Opera House. On the evening of the performance, however, while they did not actually bar the orchestra from performing, the authorities posted guards outside who did not let anyone enter the building to observe the performance.

Other Issues

Church leaders from non-ECC (Ecumenical Council of Cuban Churches) also reported that the authorities consistently denied religious visas to visiting evangelists, singers, and music groups who had been invited by Cuban churches. They said, however, that this was generally not a problem for churches belonging to the ECC.

Church leaders also complained of the limits set by the government on the number of Bibles allowed into the country and asked for prayer for more Bibles and more Christian materials for churches. They confirmed that members of the military, the security services, and journalists are still prohibited from engaging in any religious activity.

Prisoners

CSW currently supports the cases of three Cuban Christians who have been imprisoned for their work relating to human rights and democracy. While current estimates put the total number of political prisoners at over 300, and there is no doubt that there are a great many more Christians among this number, CSW believes that these three cases are emblematic of the overall problem and is dedicated to raising the specific cases within the context of the overall repression. During the 2004 visit, CSW met with the immediate family members of the three prisoners in the hopes of encouraging them by our presence and through our prayer, and of obtaining firsthand information regarding their well-being. CSW was unable to visit the prisoners themselves as the Cuban government does not allow humanitarian groups access to Cuban prisons.

Juan Carlos González Leiva

CSW met with the wife of Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leiva, Maritza Calderín Columbié, at her home in Ciego de Avila. She was overwhelmed with emotion at our visit and thanked us profusely for the "Christian solidarity" that she had experienced in the past two years. She was planning to travel to visit Juan Carlos that same day and asked us to record a message for him which we did. Throughout the visit we were noticeably watched by government informers across the street, including one who came to the door to see what we were doing.

According to Maritza, Juan Carlos's situation continued more or less the same. She said spiritually he saw his time in prison as a blessing as his faith had deepened and grown there. She quoted him as saying, "While I was outside I became preoccupied with tending the vine and dedicated myself to that instead of tending to the root which is Christ. Now in prison I have returned to that root."

CSW also met with Juan Carlos's former pastor from Ciego de Avila and who has continued to visit and minister to him at his request in prison. He confirmed that he was able to baptise Juan Carlos in the prison in 2003. In his opinion Juan Carlos was not in the best of health, physically or emotionally, but said that his mental faculties were fully functioning.

Jorge Luis García Pérez (Antúnez)

CSW visited Berta Antúnez Pernet and her husband at their home in Placetas. They confirmed that Antúnez's situation remains the same but added that he is aware of CSW's efforts on his behalf and has asked them many times to thank us. They also said that they had received large numbers of letters and cards from CSW supporters which have been a great encouragement to them. Although Antúnez is not permitted to keep them with him in prison they have taken them to show him. He especially appreciates the drawings that children have sent him. The CSW delegation took a photo of Berta and her husband with some of the letters they have received.

As the delegation said good-bye Berta said, "We want to thank you for what you are doing. Although we are in need, spiritual solidarity is far more important to us than material goods."

Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet

CSW visited Elsa Morejón Hernandez, the wife of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, where she is living in Havana. The delegation was able to chat and pray with her. She thanked CSW for the support she has received over the past year and appeared visibly more confident than at our last visit in 2002. She was especially keen to convey her gratitude for the solidarity and prayers that have come from CSW supporters over the past two years and requested that we publish her thanks in Response.

According to Elsa, her husband has continually been kept in degrading conditions, and has on occasion been denied the right to receive visitors (including Elsa and his mother), pastoral visits, prohibited from any access to reading materials including his Bible, and continues to be denied effective medical treatment. She stated that he is in extremely poor health, including serious teeth and gum problems and high blood pressure, but that he appears to be strong mentally and emotionally.

Until January 2004 he was held in solitary confinement in a cell with no natural light but according to Elsa, he was moved back into the communal area of the prison at the beginning of 2004 where he is at times allowed to take escorted walks in the sunlight.

Conclusion

In the past year, there has been a marked shift in government policy. Many analysts believe that the more intransigent communists in the central government are pushing

for a return to an orthodox communist system.² In addition to a sweeping crackdown on human rights and democracy activists in Spring of 2003, the government has also implemented highly restrictive legislation regarding property rights and is also attempting to reverse economic reforms made in the mid-1990's as the country tried to attract outside investment. Some church leaders, both inside and outside Cuba, have expressed the concern that this overall increasingly intolerant approach may also be extended to an assault on religious freedom.

Recommendations

To the Cuban government:

- To respect and uphold Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN, of which it is a member;
- To accede to and ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights;
- To bring to an end the arbitrary arrests of peaceful, law-abiding residents on account of their faith and non-violent practice of that faith,
- To release immediately and without condition, all political prisoners and to allow them to return to their families and their occupations in Cuba,
- To grant access to human rights reporters from international and non-governmental organisations, in particular to extend an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur to visit the country in order to examine and report on human rights within the country;
- To uphold all tenets of religious freedom in its role as a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights³;
- To safeguard the freedom of all people resident in Cuba to assemble and worship according to their professed religion, and particularly the right of Cuban journalists, security agents and Cubans in the military to assemble and follow their faith of choice,
- To loosen state controls over the registration of churches, and the building and renovation of churches,
- To end discrimination based on denomination in reference to legacies and the right of individuals to leave their property to the church or denomination of their choice,
- To legalise and provide legal protection for all house churches in Cuba and freedom for Cuban pastors to carry out their work without government harassment.

To the United States

- CSW calls on the United States government to continue to lend prudent support to grassroots Cuban pro-democracy and human rights movements in a manner called for by those groups inside Cuba.
- CSW commends the US government's efforts in regularly raising the cases of individual political prisoners and their families with the Cuban government and encourages the US to continue to do so.
- CSW recommends that the US government increase opportunities for responsible travel to American citizens to Cuba as CSW believes that this will

² Frank, Marc. "Communist Cuba Reins In Capitalist Enterprise," *Reuters* 13 April 2004.

³ Cuba became a member of the UN Commission on Human Rights in May 2000

have a positive effect both on human rights and understanding both in Cuba and abroad.

To the United Kingdom

- CSW calls upon Her Majesty's Government to use its influence to push for democratic and human rights reform in Cuba both through their membership of the European Union and in their bilateral relations.
- CSW commends HMG's efforts in regularly raising the cases of individual political prisoners and their families with the Cuban government and encourages HMG to continue to do so.

To the European Union:

- CSW calls upon the European Union to use its relations with Cuba, particularly in the framework of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly to encourage the establishment of democracy and respect for human rights as outlined above.
- CSW commends the EU's efforts in regularly raising the cases of individual political prisoners and their families with the Cuban government and encourages the EU to continue to do so.
- CSW commends the EU initiatives to support grassroots Cuban pro-democracy and human rights movements and hopes that these initiatives will be continued and further developed.
- CSW recommends that the Common Position on Cuba be maintained and renewed until significant improvements are made.

To the United Nations

- CSW calls upon the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to renew the mandate of a special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cuba.
- CSW also calls on the UN Commission on Human Rights to continue encouraging the Cuban government to grant invitations to special thematic rapporteurs such as those focused on torture and freedom of expression and opinion.

Thanks

CSW would like to thank all those who made this trip possible through their donations and support.