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## CUBA Baptist Pastors imprisoned after distributing aid to Guantanamo churches

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Christian Solidarity Worldwide is calling for the immediate release of two Cuban Baptist leaders accused of “illicit financial activity,” after distributing financial aid to needy churches in the Guantanamo province from Baptist churches in Florida.

According to other church leaders, all aid money has been sent legally and openly.

Pastor Ruben Ortiz Columbie and Pastor Francisco Garcia Ruiz were first arrested and detained on 3 October and have been held in prison since then. Church leaders have been prevented from visiting the men and their families have only been allowed to see them once, for twenty minutes, on Friday, 16 October.

Both men are leaders in the Eastern Baptist Convention, one of the largest denominations on the island. Denominational leaders say they are shocked and puzzled by the detention of these two men, as the Church has been carrying out this type of aid work for years, particularly over the last year, since Cuba was hit by three major hurricanes.

Pastor Ortiz Columbie, 68, is a Professor of Economics at the Santiago Baptist Seminary and heads up the denomination’s “Special Projects” department. Sources within the denomination believe that this work may be behind the two men’s arrest. Pastor Garcia Perez, 46, is director of the denomination’s youth ministries.

Tina Lambert, CSW’s Advocacy Director, said: “We demand that the Cuban Government release Pastor Ortiz Columbie and Pastor Garcia Ruiz immediately. These two men were working openly to improve the lives of fellow Cubans living in poverty. CSW also calls on members of the international community to put pressure on the Cuban government to free these leaders and to remind the Cuban government of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Cultural, Economic, and Social Rights, which it signed in 2008.”

- CSW notes there has been an increase in reported violations of religious liberty in Cuba since Raul Castro took power in early 2008.