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CUBA CSW calls on government to stop harassing church leaders

CSW is calling on the Cuban government to allow religious leaders to carry out their ministry without government interference, as it publishes its latest report on religious freedom in the country. The report, released this week, found that church leaders in Cuba have come under increased pressure over the past year.

While the government seems to have moved away from more overt forms of repression against religious groups, such as threatening church buildings with destruction, church leaders are constantly monitored by the authorities. Those who step out of line are targeted directly.

In one example, Baptist pastor Mario Felix Leonart Barroso reported coming under strong pressure from government authorities to resign earlier this month. Communist Party officials told denominational leaders that they had received complaints from members of his church, apparently in an effort to press the leaders to remove Pastor Leonart Barroso from his position of leadership. Both the denominational leaders and Pastor Leonart Barroso have questioned the veracity of the officials' claim and believe that the government is unhappy with the fact that the pastor provided spiritual support to high-profile human rights activist Guillermo Fariñas, who carried out a 130-day hunger strike this year.

CSW has found that religious freedom in Cuba has not improved over the past year and that religious repression has taken a different form. According to CSW's sources, religious repression is more subtle, refined and probably more effective. One source told CSW that levels of intimidation had not been so high since before the fall of the Soviet Union.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said, "These worrying findings come at a time when Cuba is trying to present an image to the world, and particularly to the European Union, that there have been improvements in the human rights situation. Unfortunately, the evidence shows that in reality the government is as fixated as ever on controlling religious activity. As the EU prepares to review its Common Position on Cuba, we call on the EU member states to pay close attention to the increasingly difficult situation for religious leaders who represent one of the only examples of independent civil society in Cuba."

Notes to Editors:

1. CSW's latest report on Cuba can be found on the CSW website, www.csw.org.uk in both English and Spanish.