



9.6.2010

CUBA CSW welcomes release of church leader

A respected Cuban church leader who was unexpectedly arrested and tried in court last week has been cleared of all charges after his accusers gave contradictory evidence against him. Reverend Roberto Rodriguez was allowed to return to his family and is recuperating at home after being found not guilty of “threatening behavior”.

According to Reverend Rodriguez’s family, state security officials arrived at their home without warning on August 30th and forced Reverend Rodriguez to go with them. The 67-year-old pastor, who is in poor health, was unable to take his medication and was forced to hitchhike with the two officials from Cardenas to Santa Clara. They arrived at 1 am and the following day traveled to the town of Placetras, in Central Cuba, where Reverend Rodriguez stood trial on Thursday, September 2nd.

Prosecutors recommended that Reverend Rodriguez be given a 1-year prison sentence, but following the contradictory evidence given by his accusers, the Rodriguez family believes the tribunal had no choice but to find him not guilty. However, the court handed down a fine to the church leader for reasons that are unclear.

Reverend Rodriguez became a government target after the organization he led publicly withdrew from a government sanctioned religious umbrella group in the second half of 2008. CSW believes that the criminal charges against him are an attempt to discredit and silence him.

Charges were first brought against Reverend Rodriguez in late 2008 but no trial date materialized and he has spent the last 21 months under house arrest. Meanwhile, his family has suffered verbal and physical abuse from their neighbors, apparently acting with the support of the government, and their house has been vandalized.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW welcomes the news that Reverend Rodriguez was found not guilty of the charges against him. The treatment that Reverend Rodriguez, a respected national leader and pastor for 48 years, has endured over the past two years, simply because his organization resisted attempts by the government to interfere in their internal affairs, is a disgrace. CSW calls on the Cuban government to ensure that restitution is made to the family for the damage caused to their house by their now discredited accusers, and that they are allowed to return to their home with the full guarantees of protection that are their right as Cuban citizens.”

Notes to Editors:

1. Reverend Rodriguez is a pastor in the Los Pinos Nuevos denomination and was the national president of CIMPEC, the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers. CIMPEC formally withdrew from the Cuban Council of Churches citing constant government interference in their internal affairs.
2. The behavior of Reverend Rodriguez’s neighbors is consistent with a government strategy of encouraging “acts of repudiation”, where civilians are encouraged to harass and sometimes attack Cubans who have fallen foul of the authorities, usually human rights or democracy activists. The

harassment of the Rodriguez family culminated in a physical attack against Reverend Rodriguez's daughter-in-law, who suffered a miscarriage and was hospitalized.

3. CSW's press release on Reverend Rodrigo's arrest can be found on the CSW website, www.csw.org.uk.