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CUBA Church leader publishes letter denouncing persecution

A respected Baptist pastor in Cuba has published an open letter denouncing government persecution targeting him and his church. Pastor Homero Carbonell, long-time leader of La Trinidad First Baptist Church in Santa Clara, and a high-level denominational leader, says he has been forced to retire due to prolonged government pressure and threats made against his church.

The twelve page letter, sent by Pastor Carbonell to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), gives details of the Religious Affairs Office's treatment of Pastor Carbonell and his church over the past three years. Spurious accusations against Pastor Carbonell, including allegations that he is associated with the counterrevolution and is tied to unspecified "illegalities" culminated in a series of penalties being applied to his church. While Pastor Carbonell finally stepped down from his role as leader of the church in October 2010, the sanctions have not been lifted.

Numerous requests for clarification on the part of church leaders went unanswered and a series of meetings with officials from the Religious Affairs Office, headed by Caridad Diego, failed to rectify the situation. In one meeting, government officials concluded the meeting by telling Pastor Carbonell to behave himself.

In the open letter, Pastor Carbonell echoes calls by other religious leaders in Cuba for legislation regulating religious practice, as such a law "would not only regulate believers, but would also regulate the government, and would give believers a legal instrument to deal with any legal dispute to support their claims and not leave them subject to political decisions emanating from groups in power, who can take coercive, wrong, or privileged decisions in matters of conscience."

The government's focus on Pastor Carbonell and his church appears to be driven by the church's consistent refusal to expel family members of political prisoners and members of the human rights or pro-democracy groups from the congregation. The Cuban government has long heavily pressured church leaders of all denominations to shun anyone linked to human rights or pro-democracy activism.

Pastor Carbonell's experience is in line with the conclusions by a 2010 CSW report which found that while overt forms of persecution such as the destruction of unauthorized churches had diminished somewhat, government pressure on individual church leaders had reached unprecedented levels. One church leader told CSW that government persecution had not been as subtle nor as effective since the 1980s.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We are deeply concerned and stand in solidarity with Pastor Carbonell and the entire La Trinidad Baptist Church. While the Cuban government has implemented some economic reforms over the past year, there appears to be little official will to consider reforms that would protect basic human rights like religious freedom. It is troubling that the situation for many church leaders across the island appears to be growing steadily worse. We call on the Cuban government to cease its harassment of Pastor Carbonell and his family, to remove the sanctions against La Trinidad First Baptist Church, and back his call for new legislation that would establish clear legal parameters and recourse for appeal regarding all religious activity."

Notes to Editors:

1. The Office for Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party has sole responsibility for regulating all religious activity on the island. The long-time head office, Caridad Diego, has been repeatedly criticized by leaders of all denominations. As the office is an arm of the Communist Party, there is no legal mechanism for church's to appeal decisions they feel are unfair or in error.
2. La Trinidad First Baptist Church of Santa Clara is part of the Western Convention of Cuban Baptists and is not a member of the Cuban Council of Churches. Together, the Eastern and Western Conventions of Baptists form one of the largest Protestant denominations on the island.
3. Penalties applied to the church include a prohibition on any foreigner traveling with a religious visa from visiting the Trinidad First Baptist Church, non-authorization of the purchase of a church van, and refusal to issue permission to Pastor Carbonell to leave the country to attend religious conferences abroad. In addition, officials have threatened to cancel the church's bank account which they have held since 1988.
4. Pastor Carbonell's letter is available in [English](#) and in [Spanish](#).
5. CSW's 2010 report on religious liberty in Cuba is available in English and in Spanish on our website at <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=128>