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CUBA Protestant pastors detained and interrogated in Cuba

Three protestant pastors were detained and questioned by Cuban security agents in Camaguey over the past weekend. The pastors are all affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, a network of churches that has come under heavy pressure from the Cuban government over the past few years.

On Saturday, April 30, Pastors Benito Rodríguez y Bárbara Guzmán were picked up by a group of high ranking state security agents and communist party officials. The two were taken to the Palma Street Police Station in Camaguey where they were held for two hours. During their detention the two reported being interrogated and put under heavy pressure to cease holding church services in their home.

On Sunday, May 1, a church service officiated by the two pastors was interrupted by Ms Etael, the head of the Office of Religious Affairs in the Provincial Ministry of Justice. Etael, who was also present at the time of their detention, issued a summons to Pastors Rodríguez and Guzmán to present themselves and proof of their home ownership at the Ministry of Justice on May 6. Pastor Rodríguez, aged 45, has lived in the house for his entire life.

Following Etael's visit, Pastor Bernardo de Quesada Salomón was detained after leaving his house at around 12:45pm. He was taken to a provincial detention centre where he reported being subjected to heavy pressure and threats in an effort to push him to leave his pastoral work.

Pastor Omar Gude Perez, a leader in the Apostolic Movement who is currently serving a six-and-a-half year prison sentence under conditional liberty, told CSW that pressure on the network of churches has intensified. "This is just one of the many occasions on which they have been detained, fined, or threatened by the Castro regime which has not altered in the least its policy of denial of religious liberty to and aggression towards the Apostolic Movement," he said.

Pastor Gude Perez also noted that a number of pastors, including his wife Kenia Denis and Mario Alvarez, a church leader based in San Jose de las Lajas, had recently been denied permission to leave the country to attend religious conferences abroad. They believe that this is due to the fact that they continue to share information about religious liberty violations with international human rights groups and media.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at CSW, said, "We are deeply concerned at the arbitrary detention and intimidation of Pastors Rodríguez, Guzmán and de Quesada and the more generalized hostility toward churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement on the part of the government. We call on the Cuban government to cease its harassment of these men and women and to allow these churches to register and operate freely."

Notes to Editors:

1. The officials who detained Pastors Rodríguez and Guzmán included Major Labarsena, the chief of the first unit of the National Revolutionary Police of the Province of Camaguey, Captain Saavedra of the State Security Department, Chief Seguidor, head of the Provincial National Revolutionary Police, Ms. Etael, head of the Religious Affairs Office in the Provincial Ministry of Justice, and an activist from the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR).
2. Pastor Omar Gude Perez was first imprisoned in May 2008 and sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison on trumped up charges two years later. He was granted conditional liberty in February but is prohibited from

working as a pastor or leaving Camaguey.

3. The Apostolic Movement is a charismatic network of protestant churches across the country. National leaders include Pastors Omar Gude Perez, Mario Alvarez, Bernardo de Quesada Salomon and Alain Toledano, all of whom have been subjected to arbitrary detention, threats of confiscation of property and intimidation. The Apostolic Movement, which has been prevented from registering its churches, is thought to have become a target of the government because of its rapid growth over the past few years.

4. Cuba is one of the few countries in the world that requires its citizens to apply for an exit visa in order to travel outside the country. Scanned copies of the denials are available on demand.