



7.8.2011

CUBA Pastor receives asylum in United States as state interference in church affairs continues

Cuban pastor and denominational leader Carlos Lamelas flew to Florida yesterday, along with his wife and two daughters, after being granted asylum by the United States government. The former president of the Church of God in Cuba denomination had been imprisoned for four months in 2006, and was prohibited from working legally after his release.

Pastor Lamelas was originally detained in February 2006 and charged with Human Trafficking. His home and most of the family's belongings were confiscated by the government. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) believes he was targeted because of his public criticism of government interference in internal religious affairs during his time as leader of the Church of God denomination.

He was released in June 2006 after a massive international campaign, but the charges were not dropped. In December 2006 he was put on trial. However, in a surprising turn of events, the state prosecutor failed to appear and he was found innocent.

Despite the positive verdict, the family home and goods were not returned. For the past five years they have lived in cramped conditions in the one bedroom apartment of Pastor Lamelas' elderly parents in Old Havana. Pastor Lamelas was prohibited from resuming his work as a pastor and both he and his wife were barred from legal employment, depending mostly on support from family and friends.

Since Pastor Lamelas' detention, CSW sources in Cuba have reported a change in tactics by the authorities from overt forms of persecution, such as the destruction of churches and lengthy prison terms, towards short-term detentions and the more targeted harassment of pastors. CSW believes this is an attempt to deflect international attention from the ongoing harassment of pastors.

There are also consistent reports from pastors of all denominations of government interference in church affairs and official pressure being brought to bear against church leaders who refuse to expel families of political prisoners from their churches. Methodist Pastor Yordi Toranzo was recently removed from his position by the Methodist Bishop Ricardo Pereira Dias because of his refusal to deny pastoral support to human rights activists and members of the political opposition.

Andrew Johnston, CSW Advocacy Director said, "We are relieved that the Lamelas family will finally be able to carry on with their lives free from government harassment. It is unacceptable, however, that this was only made possible by leaving the country. We know that the decision to leave their country was not made easily, and their departure is a great loss for Cuba. CSW continues to call on the Cuban government to cease its interference in the activities of religious organizations, and to cease its persecution of those who promote religious freedom."

Notes to Editors:

1. The Church of God denomination is a member of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Over the past five years, CCC leaders who have called for religious liberty to be respected have been singled out for severe harassment and persecution.