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CUBA Pastor granted asylum but blocked from leaving country

Omar Gude Perez, a Cuban pastor who was imprisoned on trumped-up charges, has been granted asylum by the United States but refused permission to leave Cuba. He is the second high-profile protestant pastor to be granted asylum in the US this year.

Pastor Omar Gude Perez, who was imprisoned in May 2008, his wife Kenia, and their two children, received the news that they have been granted asylum on July 18. Two days later, however, Cuban emigration officials in Camaguey informed them that they will not be issued exit visas, referred to in Cuba as a White Card.

The authorities justified their decision to the family by saying that Pastor Gude must serve out the remainder of his prison sentence in Cuba, despite the fact that the Cuban government allowed scores of political prisoners to go into exile last year without completing their sentences.

Pastor Gude was granted conditional liberty and released from prison earlier this year after serving three years of a six and a half year sentence. If he is forced to serve out the rest of his sentence in Cuba this would keep the family in the country until 2014. As part of the terms of his conditional liberty, Pastor Gude is prohibited from pastoral work including preaching and his movements are severely restricted.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We were relieved to hear that the Gude family has been granted asylum but strongly condemn the Cuban government's petty decision to deny Pastor Gude and his family the right to leave the country. Their decision to leave the country was reluctantly made after years of intense persecution on the part of the authorities. Unless the Cuban government is prepared to cease its persecution of the family and to allow them to work as pastors openly and without restrictions, they must afford them the same right they have granted so many others and allow them to go into exile."

Notes to Editors:

1. Pastor Carlos Lamelas, a denominational leader and pastor from the Church of God denomination, and his family were granted asylum by the US and left the country on July 7. Pastor Lamelas spent four months in prison in 2006 and after his release was prohibited from legal employment, including work as a pastor.
2. Pastor Gude Perez, a leader of a fast growing network of independent churches, was convicted in a summary trial in July 2009 on trumped up charges of "falsification of documents". The charge of "falsification of documents" was based on accusations that he had illegally taken his stepfather's surname. However, once it was decided to grant him conditional liberty, according to Gude Perez, the courts took almost a month to define the conditions of his release because official records show that his legal surname is indeed Gude Perez, contradicting the original court decision that led to his conviction and prison sentence.
3. He was originally detained in May 2008 and charged with "human trafficking", charges which were later thrown out as baseless by judges in Havana. He and his family believe he was targeted because of his leadership position in the church network, which has been denied official recognition.