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## CUBA Catholic dissident barred from religious activities

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on the Cuban government to respect the right of Caridad Caballero Batista, a member of the Ladies in White, and her family, to exercise their faith. Since January 8, Caballero Batista, her husband and 19 year-old son have been barred by the authorities from attending Catholic catechism classes and participating in any other religious activity.

Caballero Batista has told CSW that since the beginning of the year, police and state security agents have surrounded their family home each Sunday, preventing them from attending Sunday mass at the Jesus Christ Redeemer Church in the Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood of Holguin City, located in Eastern Cuba. She said that the agents have also followed her husband, Esteban Sade Suarez, and son, Erik Esteban Sade Caballero, on their way to attend catechism, and have physically and at times violently prevented them from attending.

The family of three has completed two years of catechism and is working towards their First Communion and Confirmation. "God made us free and we are not going to stop trying to go to church," Caballero Batista told CSW. "We want to receive communion and be confirmed in our church and we have worked hard for this. While we are all sinners and need forgiveness, we have not broken any laws. All we ask is that the government respect our religious freedom." She added that her son is not involved in any political activities or affiliated with any civil society group.

Over the past two months and in the run up to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the island next month, CSW has seen a sharp increase in cases of religious freedom violations in Cuba. CSW has received reports each Sunday since the beginning of the year that across the country members of the Ladies in White group, the majority of whom are Roman Catholic, are being prevented by state security agents from attending religious services, or are severely harassed when they attempt to do so.

In addition to the targeting of Catholics, CSW has received reports that four Protestant church leaders were arrested and detained on February 25 in Bayamo, Granma Province while evangelizing in the local bus station. According to local sources, one of those arrested, Juan Moreno, was so badly beaten by state security agents that he had to be hospitalized. The other three were released after being held for a few hours.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "As the country gears up for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, the Cuban authorities must be held to account for their continuous and escalating violations of religious freedom. We strongly urge the Cuban government to guarantee Caridad Caballero Batista and her family the right to practice their faith in peace and urge the authorities to cease their harassment of and attacks on other members of the Ladies in White as they attend religious services. Attacks on those who are merely trying to practice their religious faith must stop."