



(Baptist church in Yaguajay)



3.9.2012

CUBA | Sharp increase in religious freedom violations ahead of Pope's visit

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is concerned at an apparent increase in religious freedom violations ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's planned visit in May. Since January 1 CSW has recorded 20 separate incidents of religious freedom violations, compared with 28 in all of 2011.

Some incidents involve a number of people, up to 30 in one case. Religious freedom violations range from preventing people from attending church services, to the seizure of church land, and official harassment, beatings and imprisonment of church leaders.

A number of Catholic human rights activists, primarily affiliated with the Ladies in White movement, have been arrested or violently prevented from attending church services. [Caridad 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 since January 8. On March 4 she and her husband were on their way to Mass when the police, led by a State Security Officer called Yordanis Martinez Leon, took them to the police station, where they were treated roughly and detained in a badly ventilated cell for three hours. The cell was full of mosquitoes, with only a hole in the floor to use as a toilet. Six other women in Holguin city were also prevented from attending church services.

A Baptist church in Yaguajay, Sancti Spiritus Province, is facing the threat of losing their property. Local authorities claim that the church land was nationalized in October 1980 and they are planning to turn over the church property to two state owned companies. The pastor, Yuri Castellanos, and congregation, with the support of the denomination, which owns the church, are calling for international support in their case. The historic church building belonged to the Western Baptist Convention prior to the Revolution.

The pastor of a Baptist church, linked to the same denomination, in Alamar, Havana has been repeatedly fined exorbitant sums of money, equivalent to several months' salary, since December, because his church building is not registered. However, officials refuse to process his case, and as a result, the church is in danger of being forcibly shut down. The pastor and his family have also been forced into hardship as a result of the exorbitant fines.

Francisco Rodriguez, pastor of Cristo Rompe las Cadenas Church, also in Havana, has been harassed by the authorities in recent weeks, including threats of physical violence. The church is also not registered, but it is also part of the Western Baptist Convention. It is thought that the church's ministry with vagrants and delinquents, who are mostly young people, has brought the pastor to the attention of the authorities. A member of a Cuban rap group which is openly critical of the government is also reported to be attending services at the church.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "CSW is deeply concerned at the sharp increase in reported cases of religious freedom violations in Cuba. Our figures are not exhaustive; however they are an indication of a trend which our contacts have confirmed is affecting Christians of all denominations. In the run-up to Pope

Benedict XVI's visit, it is apparent that the Cuban authorities are conducting a crackdown on religious freedom, and this must not be allowed to continue unchallenged"

Note to Editors:

1. The Western Baptist Convention is, together with its geographical counterpart, the Eastern Baptist Convention, the second largest Protestant denomination in Cuba. The denomination operates legally but is not part of the Cuban Council of Churches. Large growth in all denominations and severe government restrictions on expanding or building new church facilities has resulted in the mushrooming of "house churches" linked to legal denominations and registered churches. The Second Baptist Church of Alamar and the Cristo Rompe Las Cadenas church are examples of these unregistered churches which are part of a larger, legally recognized denomination.
2. The Cuban government systematically applies pressure to religious leaders to expel and shun individuals linked to dissident and human rights groups. Church leaders who reject government interference in the church and who refuse to expel these individuals are particularly persecuted.