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CUBA | Dissidents in Holguin City on lockdown ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's visit

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned that a number of dissidents in Holguin City, in Eastern Cuba, are being prevented from leaving their homes. They have been told that they will not be allowed to travel to El Cobre, which is due to be visited by Pope Benedict XVI on his official tour of Cuba, beginning on March 26.

Among those being prevented from leaving Holguin City is Caridad Caballero, a member of the Ladies in White, who has been prevented from attending church for 14 weeks. Last weekend the police arrested her along with her husband and teenage son, in order to prevent the family from attending Sunday morning mass at Jesus Christ Redeemer Church in the Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood of Holguin City.

Many other members of the Ladies in White were prevented from attending Sunday morning mass, and roadblocks were set up in some to prevent members of human rights or pro-democracy groups from accessing churches.

In addition, four women from the Rosa Parks Foundation were arrested on their way to Mass on 20 March, and are still being held incommunicado. The authorities refuse to say when they will be released.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "The imminent visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Cuba would have been an ideal opportunity for the Cuban government to show its commitment to religious freedom, however the last few months has seen a sharp escalation in religious freedom violations. A number of individuals have had their right to manifest their beliefs impeded after being barred from religious activities on account of their political affiliations. Some religious groups have not been free to operate without interference from the government, and the reports that CSW has received indicate that the government crackdown has affected Christians across all denominations. We urge the Cuban government to guarantee religious freedom for its citizens, and to establish regular judicial channels to arbitrate religious affairs and guarantee church property, removing this responsibility from the Office for Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party."