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CUBA | Delegation urges international response to religious freedom violations

A delegation of Cuban church leaders has called on the US government to add Cuba to its Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list as one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom. The delegation, hosted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), last week briefed members of Congress and US government officials in Washington DC on the sharp rise in religious freedom violations in Cuba.

Former prisoner of conscience and denominational leader Reverend Carlos Lamelas, and his wife Uramis Frómeta, were among the church leaders who briefed the Congressional International Religious Freedom Caucus and Commissioners from the <u>United States Commission for International Religious Freedom</u> (USCRIF). The group shared personal experiences of state-sponsored human rights violations and also gave an overview of how the Cuban government attempts to control and manipulate religious groups.

In a written declaration, Reverend Lamelas said, "My case is far from being an isolated case and it is even less so the worst of the repression suffered by Christian ministries in Cuba. The difference perhaps was that I was blessed to have had my case made public in the international media. For this reason, it is my responsibility to speak out about the repressive and unscrupulous manipulations of this decaying regime. In this declaration, I urge whoever can do so, to judge the Castro government as violators of the most basic human rights. They extend their arms, like an octopus, to repress not only Cuban civil society but also all believers, including church hierarchies, which on occasion work in complicity with them."

Since January 1, 2012, CSW has <u>recorded over 40 separate incidents</u> of religious freedom violations in Cuba compared with 28 in all of 2011. 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. Some cases involve large groups of people.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "While religious freedom has always been limited in Cuba, the spike in religious freedom violations this year is deeply troubling. The figures are not exhaustive but show a clear trend, confirmed by the members of this week's delegation, which is at odds with the claim of Raul Castro that his government respects religious freedom. We echo Reverend Lamelas' call to the international community to recognize the Cuban government's systematic and escalating violations of corporate and individual religious freedom and urge the US to place Cuba on its CPC list."

Notes to Editors:

- 1. For further information, please download CSW's most recent report on <u>religious freedom violations in</u> Cuba.
- 2. A full transcript of Reverend Carlos Lamelas' signed declaration is available here.